The Whisper on the Stair

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THE WHISPER ON THE STAIR

The feeling that she was not alone took possession of her.

THE WHISPER ON THE STAIR

BY

LYON MEARSON

Frontispiece by
GEORGE W. GAGE

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To
C. E. M.

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THE WHISPER ON THE STAIR

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I

THE LADY OF THE BOOKSHOP

A GREAT mass of a man was Valentine Morley, a collection of sinew and firm flesh, a monolith who towered impressively above the average human to the extent of six feet two. Such a man was made for hand to hand combat, straining flesh against straining flesh, with muscles taut under the smooth skin; such a man was for work with his two hands, wresting a livelihood from a world that was his if he would but go forth and throttle it. That's the kind of man Valentine Morley looked.

But was he straining any flesh or tightening any muscles? Was he engaged in the business of wresting a livelihood? Not perceptibly. It is simply one of the ironies of the Fates, the stern gods who control the destinies of human kind. The only thing Val Morley was straining at the moment was his eyesight, over the fine print of an old book in the dim recesses of the second hand bookshop kept by old man Masterson on Fourth Avenue from time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

Valentine Morley did not have to strain a thing. Here were six feet two of manhood, endowed with youth, health, and a dangerous kind of good looks, even to the fascinating cleft in his firm chin—the kind of a man to conquer worlds, if he had to. He did not have to. An industrious and loving parent, now gathered to the bosom of his equally industrious ancestors, had generously left him more millions than there were letters in his illustrious name.

In a desultory fashion, now, Val was engaged in riding his old hobby. He was an amateur of books and bindings, and more of an expert than his careless attitude toward them might indicate. The old zest, however, was gone from the pursuit, much as it had departed from almost every walk of life for Val, since he had returned from his two years as a private in France. His body had returned, but there was something of Val that would always be in France; perhaps it was his former naïve enjoyment in the little things that make up a life and a world.

Nothing nowadays seemed to matter much; his life for the past two years had been so filled with great things that he could not now get himself oriented to the irritating atoms of daily routine. His spirit craved much more than living the usual grind; he rather needed something to bring him out of himself. Bindings could not seem to do it, even the imitation he held in his hand, which was so good an imitation that many an expert would have been deceived. He turned irritably to the old man, Masterson.

"How come you got stuck on this Bauzonnet, Mat?" he inquired. The old man removed his double eyeglasses and looked at him slowly.

"I didn't," he said at length. "It's a copy—that's all I paid for." He turned back to his work, that of meticulously putting a small spot of book paste on the broken binding of a copy of The Duchess.

"Good piece of work," approved Val, secretly pleased with himself for not having been deceived in the binding. It was a good piece of work; a dark blue morocco affair, gold tooled, with a coat of arms in the center, inlaid with red morocco. It was a rather gorgeous piece of work.

There was silence for a space, the crusty old bookseller seemingly intent on nothing but his work. He spoke at last, without turning; it was as if he were talking to the book in his hands, or to himself.

"People are like that," he said. "At least, the people who drift in here—and most people do get in here at some time or other."

"How do you mean?" asked Val, turning.

"Why, imitations," he replied, shortly, as if annoyed that so plain a point should have been missed.

"There are lots of them. Beautiful and expensive—on the outside. They look like the real thing. Face and expression and manner and clothes. Inside they are—copies. Just imitation, that's all." He turned definitely to his work, dismissing the subject.

"Not referring to me, or anything like that?" smiled Val, but there was no answer. He knew, of course, that there was no reference to him. He and Masterson had been friends ever since Val had left college. He understood the cranky old bookseller better than perhaps any one else in the world, with the possible exception of Sam Peters, Masterson's old clerk, who

was at present engaged in ponderously moving the sidewalk book racks into the store, preparatory to closing up for the night.

It was getting late, and one by one the street lights and the softer lights in office and residence windows flared into life, throwing the sidewalk in front into blacker relief. Masterson moved around creakily, lighting the antiquated gas jets in his store. He had never had electric lights installed—the ramshackle old building was not wired for electricity, and his store seldom was open in the evening.

A shadow halted at the door for a moment, hesitated, descended the steps and came in. Val looked up from his book. Even in the uncertain light he could see that there was a presence there—something out of the ordinary—a girl to be remembered. The mark of breeding was on her troubled face and on the garments she wore.

Her features were small and regular, with the finest, wispiest tendrils of hair escaping from under her toque that you ever saw. Her finely modeled chin had a coquettishly determined cast to it that bespoke —along with the nose that barely hinted at being retroussé—a temper that was not always kept under the firmest control. The big, lustrous eyes were shaded by miraculously long, silky lashes that cast a shadow over dark eyes, pools at midnight under the moon. She was below medium height, with hands and feet that were almost ridiculously small to be used for the purpose of supporting a human body, and when she spoke the dimples in her fine cheeks came and went ravishingly. All this Val noted from his corner, approvingly. He shut the book.

He noticed her clothes, too. Quiet and in good

taste, with the simple lines that betoken numerous dollars spent with modistes. She was expensively dressed, as even Val's superlatively male eyes could discern at a glance. In each hand she held a bundle of books bound by a strap such as school children use for their school books, ten or a dozen in each bundle. Quite a heavy burden for so slight a girl, and he noted that she put them down with relief.

All this he noted before old Masterson looked up—she was standing in front of him at the desk. She flashed a quick glance at Val in his corner, and back at Masterson. Val could see that she was nervous and ill at ease. There was agitation in her manner and a look in her eyes that he could hardly classify—could it have been fear? It seemed to him uncommonly like it, in that instant's glance at him. He had managed to see into her eyes then, before they were again shaded by her wonderful fringed lashes.

"Do—do you buy books here?" she asked Masterson. Her voice seemed cold and calm enough to Val. Perhaps it was imagination on his part.

"Why, occasionally, my child," said Masterson, creaking to his feet.

"I have some here——" she motioned to her erstwhile burden with an inclusive sweep of her small gloved hand.

"Well, I don't think I care for any, to-day," he said, and added kindly, "You see, I have more books now than I like to carry, so I'm not buying for a while."

She showed her disappointment.

"But these are very good books, sir," she protested. "I'm sure you'll like them, if you'll only look at them. I was told that you are always in the market——"

"Not now, my child," he interrupted, turning again to his work, not unkindly, but definitely. She stood there, looking at him almost helplessly.

"If you would only give me—say, ten dollars for them——" she faltered.

"Impossible," he said, without looking. "I never pay ten dollars for books—and besides, I don't need them. I have too many as it is. No doubt they are worth it." He went on pasting.

"Won't you give me something for them," she pleaded, and there was agitation in her tone.

"Sam!" called Masterson to his assistant, still without looking up. "See how much money is in the cash register."

"Two dollars and thirteen cents, Mr. Masterson," replied Peters, after a glance. "You made a deposit to-day."

He looked at the young woman inquiringly.

"Two dollars and thirteen cents," she murmured, repeating it after him monotonously.

"If that will be of any use to you—" he deprecated.

"Yes, I'll take it," she said swiftly. The money was passed over in silence and she went out immediately, leaving the books behind her. The old man turned again to his work. Val Morley sauntered out from his corner.

"Mat," he said, "you're an abominable old profiteer, and you'll come to no good end." There was no answer. It was as if the bookseller had not even heard.

"I hope, when you die and go to Purgatory, as you surely will," continued the young man, "that you'll be condemned to read Harold Bell Wright and Ouida through all eternity, world without end, and have

nothing to smoke but cubeb cigarettes and nothing to drink but celery tonic."

"My boy," answered the bookseller, "Wright amuses me and Ouida still thrills me and cubeb cigarettes are good for a cold. As for celery tonic, you'll be glad of even that to quench your thirst, where you're going. You didn't suppose I make my living by giving people as much money for their books as they are worth, did you? Anyway, I really didn't want any more books, and these are probably not worth more. Remember what I told you about imitations."

"This girl's no imitation," flashed back the young man. "She's the real thing."

"And yet—she wants two dollars and thirteen cents badly enough to give up two packages of books for them—with all those expensive clothes on her back."

"Now that you mention her back, it *was* adorable, wasn't it? By jingo, that was rather queer, wasn't it?" Val murmured, more to himself than to his friend, the bookseller.

He pondered this, for awhile. It interested him, and anything that interested him these days was distinctly worth thinking about. It isn't good to be jaded with life at thirty; life should still have a sparkle; a bubble. Here was a beautiful girl, really beautiful, with breeding, position and money marked in plain signs all over her, who seemed to need a couple of dollars badly enough to agitate her. Surely it was fear—or desperation—he had glimpsed in her eyes in that fleeting glance when their gazes crossed. Here was mystery, then . . . and a beautiful girl . . . a beautiful girl. . . .

"Listen, Shylock," he said suddenly to Masterson.

"Since you're not so anxious about those books, anyway, I'll give you a hundred per cent profit." He took out a five dollar bill. "This for the books—as is." It had suddenly occurred to him that he might find a clue to the girl's identity in the books. A bookplate, perhaps. Or an inscription.

"Nonsense. You're an optimist, my son, the old man answered quietly. "I'll make much more than that on these books—without looking."

"Then I'll give you five dollars for one of the packages—ten dollars," he tempted, as he saw denial in the eyes of the bookseller. "It's a profit—clean velvet—without your even having to open the strap."

Masterson hesitated for a moment. The young man was right . . . he was a bookseller, and it was his business to make a profit. Val saw victory in his eyes.

"Is it a deal?" he asked.

"You've bought that bundle of books," answered Masterson, pointing to one of them, containing ten or eleven books. "Show me ten dollars."

Money was passed and the deal consummated.

"Never mind wrapping them up," said Val. "I'll just throw them into the car." His machine was at the door, a flying roadster of an expensive and recent make.

II

HIDDEN MONEY

Val's apartment was in one of the big, expensive, gold plated rabbit warrens which have recently sprung up on Fifth Avenue in the early seventies, opposite Central Park. Coöperative apartment houses, they are called. You pay enough money for a fair sized country estate for the privilege of occupying an apartment for which you have to pay, in addition, a monthly rental that sounds more like a telephone number than a rental amount.

In this apartment was to be found Chong Low, a wizard Chinese cook of bland features and wonderful powers—powers that Savarin himself would not have despised. Here also was to be found Eddie Hughes, Val's man, who could handle a gun as well as a tailor's iron, and was equally willing to handle either for his employer. He was a small chap with muscles of chilled steel and the lithe speed of a mountain lion. He smoked when he desired, and he drank, in moderation when he wished, indulging in the former through the simple expedient of taking what smoking material he wished out of the humidors of his employer—and in the latter, similarly, from out the bounty provided in the cellarettes of his employer. Of all of which Val was cognizant; he had given Eddie permission to do this, saying that he would rather have him take

these things with his permission than steal them without his permission.

"Tell Chong I'll eat at seven-thirty—alone," directed Val. Eddie Hughes touched a match to the dried twigs in the huge living room fireplace, and turned to go. It was early fall and the ruddy glow of the fire, which leaped up instantaneously in the fireplace, was pleasant and comfortable, even in competition with the ample steam sent up from below.

Val seated himself in the big, overstuffed chair that faced the flames and proceeded to inspect his bargain. He loosened the strap that bound the books, and they toppled over in a little heap at his feet.

A cursory examination showed Val nothing remarkable about the books. The bindings were not such as to interest him, and the books themselves were mostly of a mid-Victorian period, with the green silk covers that were such an obsession during that time. There were three or four Dickens, a bit of Thackeray, one Matthew Arnold, and so on.

There was not a name plate in any of the books, though he found a bit of comment here and there, written marginally in a fine, childish hand. The last book he picked up was a King James bible. Here he had better luck. On the fly leaf was the inscription

This Holy Bible is the Property
of
Jessica Pomeroy

in the same fine, round hand as the marginal notes.

"Jessica . . ." he mused before his fire. "Jessica . . ." he repeated to himself. "A name that connotes something—green fields and all that sort of thing, eh?"

The name was connoting more to him at the moment—dimples, flushed velvety cheeks, a skin you love to touch, it fits well around the neck, alone at last, till death do you part, Mrs. Valentine Morley——

"Snap out of it!" he commanded himself suddenly, smiling into the fire. "Life isn't like that, you old fool. You don't see a girl for one minute one day and marry her the next. Things don't go as speedily as all that. And yet, those eyelashes! Like deep fringes over a midnight pool——"

"Dinner's ready, sir," announced Eddie.

In solitary state he made his way into the dining room and seated himself at the table. He attacked his grapefruit. Jessica—— There was something about the name he liked instinctively. Even if the name had not been associated with—— but then, he found he could no longer dissociate the name from the girl in the book shop.

"Eddie," he said to his man, "beautiful woman is Nature's noblest work, eh?"

"Yes, sir. So I have been led to believe, sir."

"Man is a lonely animal, without woman, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir; so I have been informed, sir," replied the impassive Eddie, removing the grapefruit.

"You have—er—never engaged in—er—matrimony, Eddie?"

"No, sir; I think not, sir."

"Very good, Eddie," replied his employer.

Why should such a girl want two dollars and thirteen cents? Val gave it up. And yet, if she was in trouble—and anybody who needed two thirteen must be in trouble, Val conceived that it was up to him to give her a lift out of it. Of course, he said to himself, he would go out of his way to help everybody who

was in trouble, regardless of how beautiful she was, but—her hair was sort of copper, you know, burnished copper like the old copper pots Grandma Morley used to have. And there had seemed to be lots of it, coils and masses and waves, tumbled and heaped and——

"Will you have your coffee here, sir?" asked Eddie.

"Er—yes, surely."

To-morrow he would go ahunting Jessica Pomeroy—surely, she should not be so hard to find. It was not an ordinary name. She wouldn't have that, of course. He could go no further into the matter of the books to-night, owing to an appointment for the evening.

It was after one o'clock when he returned, admitted by the apparently sleepless Eddie.

"Go to bed, Eddie," he said. "Nothing to do till to-morrow."

"Very good, sir," replied Eddie, going to his room.

The little pile of books on the floor of the living room reminded him of the riddle of Jessica Pomeroy. Perhaps there was something in them he had overlooked—an address somewhere, perhaps, or . . . He paused in hesitation for a moment.

On an impulse, he gathered up the books and took them to his bedroom with him, to look them over as he lay in bed.

By the light of his bedside lamp he went over each of the books carefully. Nothing. No trace of the identity of the girl with copper hair. He stifled a yawn politely, in deference to the fact that he was, in a way, communicating with a girl—the first one who had interested him since he had returned from France. The last book he picked up was the bible.

"Jessica Pomeroy," he recited, looking at the school-

girl hand. "I wonder . . ." he went off into an abstracted lapse. At the head of his table, perhaps, the glint of the shaded lights playing on that hair, the mouth and eyes smiling at him . . . absentmindedly, he thumbed the pages. A glint of yellow and green caught his eye in the pages.

Instantly he was wide awake, interested, turning the pages one by one to find the one so decorated as to stand out from the others. He found the page finally, drawing out from between pages one hundred and ninety nine and two hundred a yellow and green paper, which he examined with interest, giving vent to a long, low whistle of astonishment.

There came a knock on his door, and he started.

"Did you call, sir?" came the voice of Eddie.

"No, go to bed," he answered, and he heard the patter of retreating footsteps. He turned his attention again to the slip of paper in his hand.

It was a United States Treasury note for ten thousand dollars.

III

A WRAITH IN THE NIGHT

"Now why," quoth Val, "should this be thus?" He addressed the walls of his comfortable bedroom and paused for reply.

"You don't know, is that it?" he asked again. "Well, that makes it unanimous. I ask you," he remarked to himself, "why should the best looking girl in all the world sell a ten thousand dollar bill for the sum of two dollars and thirteen (count 'em) cents?" He paused again for reply. There was none.

"Now we just simply have got to find that girl. We have business with her. Those eyes . . . "

It was one of the most singular things he had ever known, he reflected. Of course, the girl had no idea the money was in the book—yet why was it there and who had put it there? Evidently she needed money badly. Well, here it was; a large stack of it. And he, Val, had but to search her out and place it in her hand . . . that hand, he had noticed it . . . white and small and . . . that is, place it in her hand, at the same time placing himself on a basis of intimacy with her by the mere fact of his having returned all that money to her.

Although ten thousand dollars was no great sum of money to Valentine Morley, still he could appreciate the fact that, if you needed it, it was a tremen-

dous item. He smiled gratefully—it was a trick of the Fates, he decided. Had it not been for that promise of the government to pay anybody who held it ten thousand dollars, he would hardly have been able to dig up a sufficient reason for calling on the girl, always supposing he was fortunate enough to be able to locate her.

Here was his reason and his excuse, thrust right into his hands by the gods themselves. Could anything be more simple? Could anything have happened more fortuitously?

"It could not," he decided. "And now to see if there are any more."

A careful search, however, failed to reveal anything else. For a long time he lay there, reviewing the events of the day, and making a plan of campaign. It ought not to be hard to round up all the Pomeroys in New York.

And then there was always old Mat Masterson, the bookseller. He had a bundle of books from the same source—perhaps they held some indication of the erstwhile owner. He would go there the first thing in the morning and look them over. That settled, he extinguished his lamp and sleepily settled himself for slumber. A shaft of yellow moonlight struck through the darkness into his room, touching everything in its strait-ruled path with a wan and sickly gold, deepening the shadows in the corners and under the furniture. He closed his eyes and slept.

His sleep was troubled by dreams, peopled with the ghosts conjured up out of the cobwebs of his imagination. A bloodcurdling, ghostly dance was done around his bed by Eddie Hughes, but not the Eddie Hughes of New York—it was Eddie Hughes as he had

known him in France where they had fought side by side. An Eddie Hughes in tin helmet, waving a Springfield with a bloody bayonet attached, the crimson stream pouring from vicious cuts in his face and body, his eyes sightless, blinded hideously by the mustard gas. Val tried to arise in his dream and found he could not—it was as though his limbs no longer refused to obey the commands of his brain. There seemed to be no feeling in them. He felt legless and armless.

Eddie Hughes gave way, finally, to a glorious girl with copper hair, arising out of a pile of books in front of his bed. She advanced to him and placed a cool hand on his brow . . . she smiled. He tried to rise. He could not. She walked back to the books, gliding in an unreal, unnatural fashion and as he looked he saw that it was not the girl at all.

It was a man, a large man, with his back turned. He was bent among the books, clumsily putting them into a pile. The moonlight, which had been absent for a few moments, it seemed to Val, stabbed through the gloom of the chamber again, striking fair upon the person of Val's dream and as Val looked he felt himself, even in his dream, turning cold all over, the gooseflesh pricking up over his body and the blood seeming to turn to ice in his veins.

The reason his dream-visitor was having trouble with the books was because—Val tried to arise and could not!—because he had no hands.

Where his hands should have been were two formless, pale white stumps.

Val knew he was dreaming, the way you sometimes do know even during the course of a dream, yet for some reason or other, he could hardly say why, he

was stricken with a terror that had its inception in nothing of this earth. The sight of that great hulk of an apparition stooping in the weak moonlight, groping among the books on the floor with those two ghastly stumps affected him as nothing this side of France had ever gripped him. He tried to shout and could emit no word. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. He could not feel his limbs—he had no command over them—it was as if he were a disembodied spirit.

Then he slept again, dreamlessly and heavily.

When he awoke the sun was high and the air in the room seemed stifling. He had a bad taste in his mouth, which shouldn't have been there as he had behaved himself meticulously the night before, and there was a suggestion of headache. There was a peculiar smell in the air—he could scarcely classify it. It was something of the hospital. He remembered his dream and smiled.

The door opened and Eddie, who had heard him creaking out of bed, entered.

"Good morning, sir," he said, and stopped to sniff the air.

"Good morning, Eddie. Do you smell it too."

"Yes sir. It's chloroform, sir," replied Eddie. "Did you leave the airshaft window in the living room open, sir?"

"No, why?"

"I found it open this morning, sir," replied Eddie impassively.

"That's strange," reflected Val. "And chloroform . . . " He leaped up suddenly. "Why, there was somebody here then, Eddie. That was no dream!"

"No sir. It was no dream, sir."

"Why, I must have been chloroformed—that's why I feel like this. And——" he stared with wide open eyes at the spot where the books had lain.

They were gone.

IV

THE THING BEGINS

A QUICK search revealed the fact that nothing else had been taken by the ghostly marauder. Even the ten thousand dollar bill had been left on the bedside table where Val had dropped it after a due examination the night before. Perhaps the burglar had not seen the bill—he had worked with a flashlight, probably, or perhaps no light at all.

They found the marks of a jimmy on the catch of the airshaft window—a living room window only about twelve feet above the street and easy of access to an active man—or easier if there were two men.

By the time the search was completed Val's headache had gone. His eye was brighter than it had been for many a day. He was interested. Life was beginning to pick up again—there were things happening. At breakfast he conducted one of his usual one-sided conversations with his man.

"Eddie," he queried, "copper colored hair is beautiful, isn't it?"

"For them as likes copper colored hair, sir."

"When you meet the best looking girl in all the world and points adjacent, Eddie, and she carries mystery written all over her—with an appearance of wealth which she belies by accepting two dollars and thirteen cents for two dozen books, and when you take

one of those bundles of books home and find that her name is, probably, Jessica Pomeroy, and that there is a ten thousand dollar bill in one of those books which, of course, it will be up to your respected—so to speak—employer to return if he can find the girl, thus making it the basis for a firm and lasting—er—friendship, and lastly, when some visitor oozes in during the wee sma' hours, perfumes your palpitating bean with chloroform and other pleasing odors, and abstracts aforesaid books, would you say that Life was beginning to be worth living once more?"

"Yes, sir. Another cup of coffee, sir?" replied Eddie, brightly.

"Yes. And Eddie, the name of Jessica Pomeroy is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. A very tasteful name for a young female person, if I may say so, sir," came back Eddie. Val looked at him thoughtfully, speculatively.

"Have you ever been in love, Eddie?" he asked at length.

"No, sir. The reason I look as I do, sir, is because I never did quite get all that gas out of my system—you know, that time when we took Neuve Ste. Jean. I——"

"Old vaudeville stuff, Eddie. What do you know of the more delicate passions anyway. I want you to drive for me this morning—order the car, will you. I'll be starting right after breakfast."

Val attacked another slice of toast with great gusto. Things were beginning to look up—midnight attacks, beautiful girls, ten thousand dollar bills, mystery, love, everything. Perhaps life was not such a dull proposition after all. Who knows, maybe to-day he would be lucky enough to have some one make an attack on

his life—or perhaps he would rescue Jessica Pomeroy from some horrible danger that threatened her, or perhaps . . .

He smiled and finished his breakfast. As long as there was a bit of beauty and a bit of fighting left in the world, he would reconsider his determination to leave this old planet flat on its back and find another where things were livelier. And this began to look promising, too. Well, the first think to do was to locate Jessica Pomeroy.

The telephone book was not of much assistance. There was half a column of the name, and they ranged from authors to zither experts, but he found nothing that conjured up the name of Jessica for him. Some of them lived in the Bronx. That let them out, of course, because Jessica would not live in the Bronx. There were some in Brooklyn—they were dismissed for the same reason.

"Suppose I'll have to visit them all," sighed Val. He would visit every Pomeroy in the United States, if necessary. He would——

"The car is here, sir," announced Eddie.

"All right, Eddie. Coming."

He lighted a cigarette as he made his way out, humming a gay little tune meanwhile. It was all about love and springtime, and all that sort of thing, and contained a reference to blue eyes and shining skies and moon and June and spoon and croon and all the world's in tune. For the first time in many days Val was, in a manner of speaking, bubbling inside.

His limousine, a French car, with Eddie sedately and properly at the wheel, stood at the curb.

"To Masterson's book shop, on Fourth Avenue, Eddie," he commanded.

"Yes, sir."

The car, galvanized into sudden and vibrant life beneath him, slid out into the smooth roadway and hummed over the asphalt on its way downtown. Val gave himself up to pleasant meditations. Possibly she was already at the bookshop, having in some miraculous way discovered the loss of the money; maybe she was there with other books.

Surely one of the volumes in Mat's possession would have her name and address. Of course, her name was Jessica Pomeroy—of that he was certain, though he was willing to admit freely that his grounds for belief in this were not impregnable. Yet, did not the name Jessica fit her so well that you might think that he, Val, had personally chosen it for her? It did! Well, then.

He lighted another cigarette. Just like a novel, he commented. It seemed to be a case of *cherchez la femme*, and he intended cherching the femme all over the bally town until he had her located. As to finding her, that ought not to be so hard. He was awakened from his reverie by the stopping of the car in front of Masterson's bookshop.

"Wait, Eddie," he threw back, jumping out and making his way to the store.

"Funny," he commented to himself. "First time I ever knew Mat to be late." The window shades were drawn down close to the bottom, shutting out all outside view, just as Mat left them every night.

A closer look convinced him, however, that the store was not closed. A streak of yellow gaslight showed at one end of the window, where the shade did not quite fit to the exact end of the glass. And now a shadow crossed the shade.

Val descended the half a dozen steps that led to the store and turned the handle. It opened easily, and he let himself into the room—into the center of a group of five or six people, including two policemen.

"Hello, what's up?" he asked, looking around for the bookseller. He did not see him, but a personage of apparent importance stepped forward. They inspected each other closely, slowly.

"You're Mr. Valentine Morley," said the other.

Val looked at his feet. They were of a good, generous size. They were capable of supporting his great bulk in comfort, if not in style. From the official's feet he looked up again to his face.

"I am, officer," he replied. "Anything wrong here?"

The officer nodded his head. "Decidedly," he replied, tersely. "I am Detective Sergeant Connolly," he stated, showing a gold badge as he spoke. Val nodded in acknowledgment, waiting.

"Matthew Masterson is dead," said the sergeant.

"Mat Masterson—is—dead!" repeated Val mechanically. He did not comprehend fully at first, it was too sudden. "Mat Masterson—is dead!" he repeated again, and Sergeant Connolly nodded his head briefly. There was a catch in Val's voice as he repeated the second time—he had loved the lonely old man. And now he was gone. It was a pity.

"How——" he commenced.

"He was murdered last night," said Sergeant Connolly drily.

V

A CERTAIN VAGUENESS OF MEMORY

Inured as Val was to death in all its varied forms, yet there was something about this bald announcement that seemed to catch him in the throat; it was as if an icy hand had suddenly clutched him, a hand reaching out of nowhere, a hand that could drag him from the here into the hereafter.

He had seen men die by his side; for weeks he had looked upon the face of death in the front line trenches. But death was in its proper environment there. One could die in the trenches—that's what one was there for. It was a fitting culmination to a man's work in the trenches.

But there was something appallingly different about a man's being picked out of the heart of a peaceful occupation in his own store, surrounded by his own books, his own environment. And yesterday, he remembered, he had joked about death with the old man. It was not so much that the man died—we all must die—he reflected,—as it was the fact that he had died so without warning, so disconcertingly soon. To joke about death one day and to be dead the next—there was an uncanny coincidence about it that Val did not fancy, somehow.

The voice of the sergeant broke in on his meditations.

"I understand you were one of the last to see him

last night, before he closed for the night," remarked Sergeant Connolly.

"I guess I was," Val nodded. "Tell me, how——" he looked his question.

The plain clothes man told him briefly all that was known about the matter, which was not much. When Sam Peters, Masterson's clerk and assistant opened the store this morning he found that the door was not locked, as usual. Upon entering, he found the body of poor old Masterson sprawled across his desk, his head crushed in, as by some heavy, blunt instrument. That was all, except that in his hand was clutched, so tightly that it was still there and could not readily be removed, a strap such as children use to keep their school books together. Did Mr. Morley happen to remember such a strap.

Mr. Morley did. He remembered instantly. There was the girl, of course, and the books she had brought. Two bundles—each one tied with such a strap.

He looked at his questioner speculatively.

"Yes," he said slowly. "There was a lady here last night—brought in some books bound in such a strap —two bundles, to be exact. I bought one of the bundles 'as is' from Masterson, and he kept the other."

"Exactly," nodded the sergeant. He knew all this, of course, from Peters. "And the books you bought—was there some clue as to the identity of the owner?"

Val shook his head promptly. "No, there was not," he stated emphatically.

"You won't mind if we look them over?" suggested the sergeant.

"If you can locate them, why——"

"How do you mean?" asked the plainclothes man, politely.

"They were stolen from me last night," admitted Val. "But the bundle that was left here——"

"That was taken, too," said the sergeant.

Val's eyes clouded for an instant. But then, of course, they would be, he decided. Undoubtedly the thief, whoever he was, knew that Masterson had retained half of the books. Probably he had refused to give them up without a struggle. He hardly supposed that they really intended to kill the old man when plainly the only purpose or motive in the whole affair seemed to be, for some inexplicable reason, to get back the books.

"Nothing else in the place was touched,' announced the detective, noting, in some measure, what was going on in Val's mind.

"Now, if we could get hold of the woman in the case——" he began.

"What do you mean, 'the woman in the case'?" inquired Val, although he knew well enough what was meant. He was sparring for time. It took no very acute mind to see the trend in which the investigation was to go—at any rate, at present. The woman was all they had to tie up to, as things stood now. If they could get hold of her, though she was innocent—as Val hastened to admit to himself—they could perhaps get some information as to what was going on, as to what motivated the events of the last two days, and—perhaps—the slayer himself. But Val had seen from the first instant of his entry here that the woman's name must be kept out of it. Innocent or not, it would be a distinctly unpleasant and unwholesome position for a girl with copper burnished hair and eyes like twin mountain pools in the moonlight, or was

it twin moons in a midnight pool, or—well, whatever it was, he would have to go easy on it and stall.

To those who did not understand the character of Valentine Morley it might appear curious that a momentary glimpse of a passable appearing girl in the half light of a bookshop should so upset his notions of right and wrong; that the remembrance of a girl he had seen for hardly more than an instant should have so taken possession of him. And yet, as Val remarked to himself, that chap Browning said something of the kind when he said that Love, which can come by a turn of the head, or a glance out of the eye, or a wisp of hair momentarily curling on the nape of a neck, can go by just these things—instantaneously, as it came. And Val could admit to himself freely and without reservation that this woman, in the brief moment of his visioning of her, had taken greater hold on him than any woman he had ever met.

That being the case, he intended to be very careful of what he said. Sam Peters, he knew, had hardly glanced at her when she was here last night. He had been busy dragging in the counter book stalls. His eyesight, too, was not what it was in his youth. He would hardly be able to give a satisfactory description of the girl—probably he had already given what description he could. Probably——

"Now, if you could give us an accurate description of the woman, Mr. Morley, we might——" suggested the sergeant tentatively. He paused and gazed at Val significantly.

"Eh, of course, of course," replied that worthy, brought up short out of his reverie. "Anything I can do, why, just rely on me."

"To be sure," smiled the detective sergeant. "It's the duty of all good citizens——"

"To come to the aid of the party, Mr. Connolly," replied Val. "Well, what is it I can do?"

"Why, a description of the woman—her appearance, clothes, and all that."

"Yes, of course," came back Val. "She was, I think, about medium height—you understand, of course, I paid very little attention to her, so my description will, at best, be very vague."

"Surely," acquiesced Connolly. "But there will be some particular details you can remember, if you try really hard. The color of her clothes perhaps, her hair and eyes, what kind of clothes she wore."

"Naturally," said Val. "She wore—er—a—er—a dress, I think, of some sort of feminine material reaching to somewhere between her—er—ankles and her—er—ahem!—her——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the sergeant a bit impatiently, "they all wear 'em between the ankle and the ahem these days, most of them more so—but what kind of a dress was it, and what color?"

"Why, it was an—a—er—ordinary dress, don't you know—not the kind of dress at all that one describes, sergeant—if you know what I mean? The color? Dashed if I can just remember—think it was a sort of purple, or was it blue?" He paused in the struggle to remember. "Come to think of it, it might—er—have been—er—reddish yellow, or maybe there was a touch of green—well, there was some color in it, sergeant. You can rely on that—but she'll probably have changed her outfit, anyway, won't she? Her hat—why, she sort of wore it on her head, if I remember correctly, a little to one side—er—or maybe

not so much, if you know what I mean, Mr. Connolly? I—er—mean it was just a common sort of hat of some color or other—didn't pay much attention to it."

"Er, thank you, Mr. Morley," put in Connolly drily. "That's very helpful, so far. Now, about her personal appearance, why——"

"Why, of course, of course," Val hastened to interpose. "Her personal appearance, to be sure." What volumes Val could have written concerning the lady's personal appearance! What odes to the particular shade of that copper burnished hair! What sonnets to the dainty sweep of those eyelashes! What short stories having to do with the contour of her nose! He gave the sergeant her personal description with barely checked enthusiasm.

"About—er—medium height, sergeant, I think, or perhaps a little shorter—ahem, or was it a little taller?" He paused while he discussed this with himself. "Er—well, it's of no consequence. That wouldn't distinguish her—most women are about medium height or a little taller or a little shorter, anyway. Her eyes were of some color or other, I could not see them in this semi-darkness, anyway, and the same for her hair. To tell you the truth, sergeant, now that I come to describe her I find I hardly noticed her at all. People are like that, aren't they?" he inquired blandly.

"Like what?" asked the sergeant irritably.

"I mean, like I am—er—go through life, you know, with their eyes shut, hardly knowing what goes on around them. You know, you meet and talk to people every day that you couldn't for the life of you describe, although you may know them well, so how can you expect a man to describe a woman he had no cause to notice"—the Lord have mercy on your soul,

Valentine Morley!—"and only saw for a moment or two? What was the name of this bird—a magician, I think, who used to walk full-speed in front of crowded shop windows and then was able to describe accurately every little thing in——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted the officer. "You've been about as helpful as Peters, here," he waved to the old man.

"Sorry, I'm sure, officer," replied Val, with a sincere show of regret. "Anything I can do, of course—why——"

"Thanks, Mr. Morley," said Connolly. "Is there anything you want to say to Mr. Morley, coroner?" he asked, turning to another member of the group.

"Not at this moment, sergeant," replied the coroner. "A little later, perhaps. Don't go away yet, Mr. Morley."

Val nodded. "All right. Any objection to my talking to Mr. Peters," he nodded in the direction of the bookseller's old clerk. "I am interested in the disposition of this store, naturally, and——"

"No objection at all," interposed both the coroner and Connolly. "Go right ahead." They dismissed him temporarily with a nod and continued their consultation in a little group, finally going into the back room presumably for another inspection of the body, which had been laid out there after the coroner had made his examination. Val sat down next to Sam Peters. The old clerk raised his white head, his eyes red with weeping.

"Oh, Mr. Morley!" he whispered. "What a horrible thing——"

"There, there, Sam," soothed Val. "Don't talk about it. I know how you feel."

"He was like a brother to me, Mr. Morley," said Peters. "I have been with him for twenty-five years, and to find him as I did this morning——" his voice quavered and broke. Val clapped him on the shoulder gently.

"I know, Sam, I know. I loved the old man, myself. What are you going to do now?" he asked.

"Me?" asked Peters. "I don't know—don't care much, now. I wouldn't want to work for anybody else now, and yet——"

"Didn't Mat have a sister somewhere?" asked Morley.

"Yes, his only relative. Lives out of town. She has been telegraphed for. She'll probably be here today. What a homecoming!" They were silent for a brief space.

To Val the most pitiable object of it all was old Peters, whose life was wound around that of Masterson's and the old bookshop. A man absolutely without friends, presumably, and whose only interest in life was his work here among these books which had been his friends and companions since his youth. He was old now—there was little more left in life for him—and now that little was to be ruthlessly taken away.

"I suppose she'll sell the old shop," he put in, tentatively.

"I suppose so," sighed the old man.

"And then——"

"And then——" the old man sighed again. "I suppose I'll be turned out, of course. Who would want to hire a man of my age? And even if I could get another job, I hate the thought of leaving this place. This has not been a job for me, Mr. Morley," said the old man. "It has been my home, my life. It

meant something to me to come down here every day and fuss around these books—something that I cannot explain—something more than merely buying and selling books. Books get to be more than just paper and print to you, you know——" he was silent again and neither spoke a while. It was a minute or two before Val broke the silence. When he did he offered his suggestion tentatively, almost hesitatingly.

"Why don't you buy the place, then?" he asked. The other looked up at him with a half smile and shook his head.

"Hardly," he replied. "I've managed to save a little money—but far from enough to take over this business. You know——"

"Yes, I suppose so," offered Val, interrupting the old man. "But it wouldn't take so much, and if you don't mind accepting help from me, why . . ."

The old man's hand went to his throat and his old eyes shone a bit brighter. His voice quavered a little as he answered.

"Why, Mr. Morley, it's mighty decent of you. Of course, I couldn't accept——"

"Oh, simply a loan, of course," interposed Val brusquely, waving any possible objections aside with his hand, which he flicked in the air with a slight gesture as though to a business man of his caliber it was nothing. "Just a loan, you know. Of course, I should expect it repaid with interest," he stated, quite severely. "It is purely a business transaction—you understand, to be sure."

The other smiled. "Ah, you say that, Mr. Morley, but I know it is because this old place means something more than just books to you, as it does to me, that you make that offer. We'll call it a loan, since you

want it to be so—but it's a kind thing to do for a burnt out old man, and I'd like you to know that I appreciate it, my boy."

"Nonsense!" declared Val sternly. "One must put out one's money at interest—it must be earning something for you, eh? And why not here? So we'll call it settled, then. You attend to the financial details of it and let me know how much money will be needed."

Peters nodded and his thin, withered little body shook visibly. After many years he was to be independent at last—he was to be the owner of his own bookshop. It was something to have lived for. And this shop—he sobered in an instant, suddenly, as the thought of poor old Mat Masterson came back to him—he had almost forgotten. He was rejoicing over his own good fortune while his late employer and friend lay cold in the back room—unknowing in the midst of his own store, the work of his hands and his brains. He——"

The voice of Val recalled Peters to himself. Val was leaning close to him—the others were in the rear room. Val spoke quietly, softly, into his ear.

"About that—er—lady that was here last night—ah—you understand, don't you, that—er——"

"Yes, perfectly, Mr. Morley," answered the old man. "To tell the truth I scarcely noticed the young female person—er—not enough, to be sure, to give a coherent description of her. Impossible to do so, I might say."

"Of course. Thank you, Peters—as the proprietor of a bookshop, you are a model of discretion." Val clapped him on the shoulder and arose as the coroner and his party came out of the rear room.

"Is there any further need for my presence?" asked Val, addressing the group at random.

The coroner answered. "I am through with you, if Sergeant Connolly is. There is nothing to be gained by detaining you. Of course, you may be wanted at the inquest—I think it will be the day after to-morrow—but if we need you there you will be sent for."

Val bowed assent. "Surely. Just call me up at my home and leave the message if I'm not there. Any further information I can give you——"

"No, not now," interposed Connolly. And under his breath: "*Further* information—holy smoked mackerel!"

"Righto," said Val. "I'll be off, then. Hope you have some luck in getting the murderer—beastly thing to do, you know."

VI

THE START OF THE CHASE

Under his light, unmoved exterior Val was deeply concerned about the affair. His emotions were varied and complex. In the first instance, he was deeply attached to old Masterson—one of those smooth, placid, deep affections that come sometimes between old and young, an affection built solidly on intimacy, sympathy and understanding. It had been as though out of all the youth in the world Mat Masterson had picked Val out; as though he had said: "Here, from out of the millions of young men, is the one I specially love; for behold, he mocks me not, saying 'Go to, gray-beard loon' or words to that effect. That is, here is one bird I really can stand." And it was as though Val had said: "Here, out of all the millions of old men in the world, is one who does not think that a man who has youth must necessarily be a fool; for lo, am I not able to speak to him of the enthusiasms of youth. That is to say, I'm certainly strong for that old guy."

Not that either of them had ever formulated the matter thus succinctly. Men don't do that at all, and women never do unless they don't mean it. Yet the feeling ran true between these two. Mat typified all of age and the venerable to Val, and on his part Val was youth eternal to Mat—he was all of youth, a sort of a composite picture of all the beauty and fire and dreams in the world.

And now Mat was gone; the import of it came to Val keenly, oppressively and almost overwhelmingly as he stepped out of the bookshop into the sunlight. Mat was gone; Val felt that a definite era in his life had closed—something had been done that could never be done again. New things were before him, Val felt —a new phase of life, perhaps. And he was standing in sunlight that Mat would never again see. For a moment every nerve in him cried out for vengeance.

And yet, what would the apprehension of the murderer mean? Thought raced through his brain like lightning across a summer sky. It would mean the dragging in of the girl with copper burnished hair, his lady of the bookshop. He knew, of course, that she was in no way guilty of the deed, yet regardless of the circumstances, she must inevitably be connected with the affair in the papers—her name dragged through the mire of publicity. He remembered her eyes—that strange look—was it terror?—of the night before. Curious, wasn't it, how a man could remember a fleeting, evanescent glance in a woman's eye—and not remember the color of the clothes she wore? Now, as Connolly might say——

Now he had to find her. It might seem that he was going to a great deal of fuss and trouble about a girl he had only seen for a moment. That is, it might seem so to you. But it did not seem so to Valentine Morley. It was quite simple. He had seen, for an instant, a woman he really thought worth while. He had lost her again in that same instant. It was obvious that the thing for any sane man to do was to find her again.

"Wait a minute, Eddie," he said to his impassive man. "Wait'll I see where we're going."

He stepped into his limousine and picked up a telephone directory which he had brought along for just that purpose. Pomeroy . . . Pomeroy . . . he thumbed the pages rapidly until he came to the one he wanted. He found it. M-m-m . . . Pollock . . . Polonsky . . . Polsky . . . Pomerantz . . . ah, here it is, Pomeroy. He selected one that looked promising on West Sixty-eighth Street, told Eddie his destination, and settled himself back to his dreams and his reflections as the car throbbed under him and glided out into the roadway.

It was not going to be hard. All he had to do was to keep going until he had exhausted the possibilities of the telephone book and the city directory. Even if he did not come across her directly, surely some Pomeroy in the city would be able to direct him to Jessica Pomeroy. There could not be many Jessicas, could there? No; he answered his own query. There could only be one—that is, always supposing that her name was really Jessica Pomeroy—a fact which he was taking for granted.

He got no satisfaction, nor did he get any information, at the first Pomeroy on West Sixty-eighth Street. She was an old maiden lady who knew nobody of the name of Jessica Pomeroy and probably would not have told him if she did know. From her manner, she regarded him as possibly somebody who was without the law—a creature going around trying to pick up unprotected women. She strained her Peke closer to her thin breast as she coldly closed the door on him.

The next place was East Ninety-second Street. He found that it overlooked the East River. He also found that the neighborhood was poor and squalid,

peopled with crying babies and unkempt adults. He also found that the person who answered to the name of Pomeroy was a person of color, a negress who leered at him filthily, a black, shapeless mass who blended perfectly with the dead and gone odors that filled the dark, uncarpeted halls.

At the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth Pomeroy his luck was no better and at two o'clock in the afternoon he found himself at upper Broadway, nearly out of gasoline, hungry, and just about beginning to be angry. It was a curious thing that people all had to go and pick out one name—as though there weren't enough to go around. Now here was Jessica Pomeroy—anybody seeing her would know that the name belonged to her and her alone—why go out of your way, that being the case, and pick on the name Pomeroy when you could just as well select Cohen or Flanagan or Rocco or something equally flagrant? Val was beginning to be exasperated with people—they showed so little originality!

They stopped at a restaurant to eat—Eddie eating lunch with his employer.. This was nothing new. Eddie often lunched with his employer when they were alone. There was more between them than is usual between master and man. They had served on the western front together, they had quenched their thirst in muddy water out of the same canteen and they had cursed the same second lieutenants together. The friendship between them was only thinly disguised by the superficial veil of conventionality that present day social custom had thrown over them.

Over their meal Val explained to Eddie just what it was he was trying to do and how he was going about

it. During the recital a newsboy came in with the early afternoon editions of the papers.

"Let's see what my newspaper has to say about it," remarked Val, calling the newsboy and buying a copy of the *Planet*. Although it was not largely known, Valentine Morley was the largest individual stockholder in this immensely profitable enterprise, having been left a block of stock by his father that comprised forty per cent of the entire stock in existence. To celebrate his personal interest in the paper Val permitted himself, occasionally, to read the sheet. That, so far, had been all the interest he took in it, although he was Vice-President of the corporation and journeyed down to Park Row twice a year to sign his name to papers which he was assured by his lawyer were fitted to be graced by his classic signature.

The *Planet*, as might have been expected, had a great deal to say about the matter, which it called The Mysterious Bookshop Murder, the idea conveyed being, presumably, not that the bookshop was mysterious but that the murder was mysterious. The woman in the case was called The Lady of the Bookshop, and the papers expressed the opinion that it would not be long before she was in the hands of the police. It was agreed that her apprehension was necessary if the police were to start untangling the dark snarl. She, undoubtedly, could throw light upon the matter.

Mention was also made, of course, of Val—information gleaned from the coroner or Sergeant Connolly, no doubt. The account ended with a demand on the part of the *Planet* that the police do something—that the crime wave was becoming wavier every day; a per-

manent wave, as it were—and that it was up to the police to locate the mysterious lady.

"Well, we'll just about have to beat the darn old police to it, Eddie," remarked Val when they had thoroughly digested what the newspapers had to say concerning the affair. Eddie nodded his head gravely.

"Considering your feelings in that quarter, sir, we'll just about have to lay a barrage all around her. We haven't tried the Bronx yet," remarked Eddie.

"The Bronx!" ejaculated Val. "Eddie, how often do I have to tell you that it's bad form to kid your employer—that it just simply is not done in our best circles."

"Just the same, if you don't mind my saying so, sir, you never can tell," persisted Eddie. "You've exhausted all of Manhattan, haven't you?" Val nodded.

"Well, then!" Eddie said this respectfully, as one should say such things to one's boss, but there was a touch of triumph in it, too. He was human—and he knew this was one argument he would win.

He did. Val capitulated with very little argument—he certainly was not going to give up the search simply because it led him into the upper reaches of the Bronx—one should be prepared for hardship, he said. If any residents of the Bronx read this, it is understood that no offense was intended by Val—he simply did not know that people lived there, that was all.

VII

THE TRAIL GETS WARMER

The Bronx yielded no better success. It took several hours to exhaust its possibilities, but finally the seekers after Pomeroys were obliged to concede that if Jessica Pomeroy lived in the Bronx, she was not in the telephone book, anyway, nor was she known by her name to any of the Pomeroys they interviewed.

At dinner time they drew up in front of Val's home, tired though not discouraged. Chong had dinner ready in a few minutes, and Eddie became once more the impassive servant waiting on his master at table.

Val ate in silence for a long time, thinking over the surprising events of the day and planning a course of action. The tang of the chase was keen in him; his blood was beginning to course warm with the joy of the hunt. He was looking for a woman; not a woman —the woman. What was there on earth that a man could search for more precious than the one woman? What could he find more worth the ardors of the search?

Val asked himself these questions mechanically, his mind turning, meanwhile, on the problem of locating Jessica Pomeroy. His mind, however, yielded him nothing, but a blank at the moment, and he gave vent to his irritation in a single expletive:

"Damn!" he said; low but forcibly.

He looked up and Eddie Hughes was turning away, the ghost of a smile flickering on the ends of his lips, to be lost immediately in the mask of his countenance.

"What the devil are you laughing at?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir. I forgot myself," replied Eddie. "I was thinking about the Japanese who described billiards as a game where two large men poked at three little balls with sticks, and one man said 'Damn!' and the other said 'Hard luck, old man!'" He turned away.

Val could not resist a smile. "What's that got to do with this case?" he inquired.

"Nothing, sir," responded Eddie. "Only, in a billiard game, a man generally has another chance to shoot."

"You mean you have an idea?" queried Val. The other nodded.

"I think so, sir."

"Well, if you have, spill it. Don't pull any of your old allegories on me—I'm not a Bible student," snapped out Val.

"Why, it's just this, sir. You know the *Planet*, of course."

"I ought to," came back Val. "I own a couple of million dollars' worth of stock in it."

"Exactly." Eddie bowed his head respectfully. "Well, if you want information about anybody in the world, a newspaper is the place where you stand the best chance of getting it. If there has ever been a Pomeroy who had a daughter by the name of Jessica —if he has ever had reason to figure in the papers at all—you'll probably find out what you want in the 'morgue' of the *Planet*. Dessert, sir?"

Val stared at him as though he were a wraith risen

from the dead. After a long moment he pounded on the table with his fist.

"Well, if I'm not the daddy of all the dumbbells in the world!" he burst out. "Of course—the *Planet!* I'm Vice-President of the corporation—all I have to do is walk in and pick out my information, if any. To-morrow morning, first thing, Eddie. Why——"

"Dessert, sir?" asked Eddie again, impassively.

. . . . . .

Wallace Chillingham, editor of the *Planet*, busily engaged on a manuscript, looked up irritably when the door of his private office opened. He had distinctly instructed his office boy that he was to be permitted to work in peace, without let or hindrance, or interruption of any kind. And now here he was bothering him again by——"

"Get out of here before I hit you so hard that your whole family will feel sick, you little beast——" he rasped at the boy, and then looked up in astonishment, because it wasn't his office boy at all. It was Valentine Morley.

"Hello, Wally," he smiled, seating himself on a corner of the other's flat-topped desk and lighting a cigarette. "I see that you're your own good-natured self, as usual." He shook his head lugubriously in mock concern at the editor. "What a disposition! If I had a disposition like that I'd swap it for a bulldog and drown the poor mutt."

The editor laughed. "How'd you get in?"

"I had to kill a couple of office boys and other menials—but I'm feeling full of pep this morning, so that's all right. How's every little darn thing with you?"

"K. O." answered the editor. "I'm busy. You're a nice boy, Val, and I like to see you get along—so do so. Remember, you expect dividends from this old sheet semi-annually and——"

"That's so," mused Val, as though this had but occurred to him now for the first time. "I *have* got a little stock here, haven't I. I've been informed that I'm Vice-President, or some other fool thing in this yellow sheet—so, unless I have the wrong dope as to what I really am here, I'm an official and ought to be treated with respect. And what do I get?" He went on oratorically with a recital of his wrongs. "I get ordered out, that's what I get. I get contumely heaped all over my bean. I—say, Wally, did you ever see any contumely?" he broke off to ask. "I mean——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Wally. "Bustin' into my office like this! What the devil do you want—and make it snappy, too!" He roared this at Val. Val smiled and slipped down into a chair alongside of the editor.

"There, there," he soothed him, patting his sleeve, "calm yourself, ole kid—I'm coming to what I want. Suppose I were to tell you the name of the mysterious lady in the Masterson case—eh? What would you do?"

The other stared at him in unbelievable astonishment. "Do—you—know—that?" he asked slowly. Val nodded.

"Then, for the lova Mike," he entreated, leaning toward Val and gripping his knee with long, bony fingers, "tell it to me, will you? You'll see darn quick what I can do with it? Any other paper or the police know it yet?" Val shook his head.

"Gawd, what a beat!" ejaculated the editor. "Quick,

Val, give me the dope. What's her name and where's she live and how does she come into this thing and——"

"Lay off! Lay off!" roared Val, holding him off. "I'm not goin' to tell you her name—I simply wanted to know what you would do if I did tell you, that's all."

"You're *not!*" The editor stared at him. "Why, you insane, simple minded millionaire, you won't get out of this office alive if you don't—why, I'll tear it out of you with these hands, you crazy oilcan, you!" He had risen in his excitement. Val calmly shoved him down in his chair again with a bang that augured ill for the cane seat. The editor's teeth shook with the shock. He leaned forward again.

"But listen, Val—we gotta have that name. It's a beat—the beat of the century!" he implored. "This is your paper, Val—*your* paper! Why, there's nothing we couldn't——"

"Cut it out, Wally!" snapped Val. "No chance, get me? No chance——"

"But why, Foolish?" persisted the editor. "This is too damn important too——"

"It's more important to me. Listen and I will a tale unfold, Wally, that will cause the red red gore to course quicker even through those anemic, desiccated veins of yours. Listen and I will spin you a yarn in strict confidence—and if you print a word of it, you pirate, I'll come down here and hit you so hard that you'll bust a hole in your shadow." He looked at him significantly, taking hold of the editor's wrist and squeezing until the tears came to Wally's eyes.

"Quit, you crazy murderer, you! Whatcha tryin' to do, anyway—collect my insurance? I won't say a word." Val let go.

"Ah," he said blandly, "since you agree with me so absolutely in the need for secrecy, I feel I can unburden this bosom to you as to an understanding, friendly soul. Know then, oh, Wally, that this poor heart of mine burns with love for——"

He told him all details of the case, leaving out only mention of the name of the girl. He was willing to trust Chillingham, who would rather cut out his tongue than betray a friend—newspaper ethics to the contrary notwithstanding—but yet, it was just as well not to put too great a strain on a man's will power. And this would certainly have been a beat!

Val told of his unavailing search for the girl the day before.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" queried Wally.

"Why, it occurred to me—to Eddie Hughes, that is—that you might have some information about her or her family in your files—the 'morgue,' don't you know?" said Val.

"That's so," answered the editor. "Probably we have. Just tell me the name and I'll go right out and get the dope——"

"Good idea!" snapped Val. "Just tell you the name, eh! Well, I guess I can look up an alphabetical file as well as you can—or anybody else in this godless joint. Just show me the place and I'll do all the dope getting necessary, see."

"We don't allow people not connected with this office to look in our files," responded the editor coldly. "We don't——"

"Say, listen, my boy," said Val softly. "I'm connected with this office just enough to be able to vote you out of a job—get me? My forty per cent of stock says I go into that 'morgue'—show me where it is if

you want to keep in good health and see the beautiful sunshine yet awhile."

Chillingham capitulated. He knew he had no ground to stand on, and that when Val spoke in that tone something was very apt to drop. The Vice-President had a right in the files—a child would have admitted that.

Half an hour later, dusty from his delving into the files, Val had gathered what he thought would be valuable. It was a stroke of good luck, nothing more nor less, he said to himself—the fact that he happened to be a stockholder in an influential newspaper.

More than a year before, he found, old Peter J. Pomeroy, a breeder and racer of thoroughbred horses, had died, leaving as his only issue a daughter named Jessica. The obituary notice informed him that the funeral was to be from the deceased's late residence, 999 West 86th Street, New York.

He found that the address given was a family hotel, overlooking Riverside Drive and the Hudson. The elevator man, who was new to the job, had never heard of anybody of the name of Pomeroy. Certainly they were not living there now. Val went to the office of the hotel and inquired of the manager.

Yes, Peter Pomeroy had lived there with his daughter. She had stayed on for a while after his death, but a few months ago she had moved. He knew her new address, it being occasionally necessary for him to forward mail to her.

"Fine," remarked Val. "What is it?"

The manager looked him over calmly. "I don't know," he said slowly, "whether I ought to give you her address."

"Why not?" demanded Val.

"Well—how do I know she wants you to have it? I think a great deal of Miss Pomeroy—have known her for years—and I wouldn't want to give her address to a man she did not want to see. I was very sorry when financial reverses made it impossible for her to stay here, where I could keep an eye on her—but she refused to stay under the circumstances. If her finances had——"

"Well, that's what I want to see her about," put in Val. "I have information of great financial value to her and——"

"Well, why don't you write it?" queried the hotel man. "I'll see that she gets the letter."

Val shook his head. "This is not that kind of information—it's got to be given personally. In fact, I don't mind telling you that I have a large sum of money with me that belongs to Miss Pomeroy—money which I wish to give her personally."

The hotel man considered for a few moments. He was an elderly, slow man, calm and sedate in his movements and in his habits of thought, and not to be rushed off his feet by every nice looking stranger who happened into his hotel.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said at length. "Give me your name and I'll call her up and ask her whether she wants to see you."

"Fair enough," said Val. "My name is Valentine Morley." The older man looked at him with new interest. Everybody in New York knew Valentine Morley, possessor of the Morley millions, to say nothing of the Congressional medal of honor. The hotel man reconsidered once more.

"Well, that being the case, I guess it will be all right. I won't bother to telephone. I recognize you now,"

he said. "Just wanted to make sure you weren't some cheap trifler who wanted to annoy her, that's all. Sorry."

"That's all right," smiled Val. "You were perfectly right—if I were you I wouldn't give her address to anybody else, though, for a while. I'll get her to call you up and confirm that."

Twenty minutes later Valentine Morley was calling upon Jessica Pomeroy.

VIII

THE MAN WITHOUT HANDS

The house to which he had been directed was in a side street, one of a whole row of flat houses, all with brownstone stoops, all four stories in height—walk-up flats—most of them fallen upon parlous times from their previous fairly high estate—if a flat house can be presumed to have had a high estate in some mysterious past.

With his motor chugging at the door and his heart chugging within him Val rang the bell labeled "Pomeroy" and was rewarded almost immediately by a ticking at the lock of the door that suggested to him that he could enter if he pushed the door while the ticking was in progress.

He pushed the door and ascended the steps that presented themselves to him at the right of the hallway. Two flights above him he noticed a lightening of the encircling gloom of the hall. This he took, and rightly, to be due to the fact that somebody had opened the door to see who was coming. He gained the door and confronted a neat old woman who looked at him inquiringly.

"I'm looking for Miss Jessica Pomeroy's apartment," he said.

"This is her apartment," said the old woman. "Who wants to see Miss Pomeroy?"

He extracted a card from his wallet, handed it to the ancient servitor and was bidden to come inside. He was ushered into a living room that was a grateful model of good taste, when you take into consideration what he had expected from the surrounding circumstances.

"Miss Pomeroy will be out directly, sir," said the old woman. He nodded and seated himself on a comfortable divan, inspecting the room with interest. The furniture was gracefully made, combining comfort with a quiet elegance that spoke much for the occupant; a few Japanese prints were on the wall, and over the period mirror on one wall was a colored print of a blooded racehorse—not the usual racehorse print, however—it was to be seen that this print was the work of a master.

On another wall was a Whistler etching, skyrockets and all, and under it was a blue vase in the best Ming period. The portières and draperies were in deep blue velvet, drawn back by cords of burnt orange, and the curtains were a delicate tracery against the transparency of the windows. A baby grand piano jutted out of one corner, and he was thankful that the effect of the room had not been spoiled by an upright, because, he considered, there are no uprights that are not ugly. It was a comfortable room that looked as though it were lived in, with the piano open and a French song on the rack, as though the singer had just stepped out for a moment, and other music scattered carelessly over the top, around the base of the Japanese lamp that stood on the piano.

At his hand were a couple of library books—he opened them. One was a volume of Leonard Merrick. The other was a thin volume, a play by Herman Bahr

—"The Master" in the excellent translation of Glazer. He nodded approvingly—this girl had a comfortable taste in literature. He was engaged in examining the latter book when the portières parted and she entered, standing for a moment against the portières, with her copper burnished hair flying against the deep blue in a contrast that would have brought joy to the heart of Velasquez.

He was on his feet in an instant, never taking his eyes from her—actually eating her up with his burning eyes. Her gown, of some soft stuff that lay lovingly next to the white skin of her neck and flared out into panniers at the hips, had a touch of green in it—the touch of green that every light haired girl knows so well how to employ.

Her eyes were two seas of troubled color, and in her cheeks flared two bright spots that were all the more ravishing for the fact that they never came out of a drug store. He could see that she recognized him instantly—the flash of surprise that came into her eyes told him that. Her hand went to her throat in a queer motion, as though her breath came hard, and came away again wearily, down to her side.

"Mr. Morley?" she inquired, and Val had to admit to himself that never had he heard music that was comparable to her intonation of his name. It was like a harp in the south wind, he told himself. He bowed.

"I must apologize for this intrusion," he began in the conventional form, though his whole being cried out against it. Apologize for nothing! He was here because he wanted to be, and a whole battalion of police couldn't keep him away.

"I must apologize for this intrusion," he said again, and she smiled.

"That's two apologies," she said. "I accept both of them. Now, if you'll tell me——"

"Yes, I'll tell all," he grinned, and they both laughed; neither knew why, exactly. There was something vibrating between them, something of an ethereal chord to which they were both attuned, something. . . .

"Won't you sit down for a moment, and tell me about it?" She nodded to the divan. She sat down opposite him and he did as he was bidden.

"Why—why—er—the—fact is——" he started coherently.

"You can smoke if you want to," she put in, seeing that he was ill at ease. He smiled his gratitude and lighted a cigarette, feeling more easy at once.

"You see," he commenced, "I was in old Masterson's store the other day when you—er—released some books to him." She nodded.

"I remember," she said. "I noticed you." She had noticed him. Val could have shouted it from the housetops. Miracle of miracles—she had seen him—she knew that he was alive—she was conscious of Valentine Morley. "I noticed you." Val was familiar with the poets, but at the moment he could not think of a poet who had ever lived who had written a sweeter line than that.

"Well, I rather took a fancy to the books," he went on, "and I bought one of the bundles from Mat. That's how I happened to know your name—it was in one of the books. You—er—know what happened at Masterson's, don't you?" He paused.

A look of absolute fright came into her eyes. Her white hand went to her throat again. He could see she was the victim of some wraith of fear that haunted her waking and her sleeping moments. It was not a

new fear, he could see that. It was something expected—something that was always there.

She nodded her head slowly. "And you're from the police——"

He laughed reassuringly, longing to take her in his arms and swear to protect her forever.

"Certainly not—I'm from Valentine Morley. You see, I happened to be looking through the books and I found something in one of them that might be of value to you—that's why I took the trouble to look you up." He plunged his hand into his pocket and fished out his wallet. Out of his wallet he took the ten thousand dollar bill and handed it to her.

She gave a gasp of utter astonishment and surprise when she saw what it was.

"Why, it's a ten—thousand—dollar bill!" she ejaculated. "A ten thousand dollar bill!"

He nodded his head. "I rather thought you might be glad to see that——"

"Glad!" she echoed, "Why, if you know—if you only knew how I needed this money——"

"Yes," he said, "there are few people who don't need ten thousand dollars."

"How can I thank you for——" she began.

"Don't try," he put in. "It was nothing, really. Just a pleasure to be able to——"

"Not many people would have returned it," she insisted. "You must know how grateful I am to you." She leaned forward and put her small hand on his arm. A thrill went through him. He remembered Browning's line about the hand of the wife of Andrea del Sarto—he was a Browning enthusiast—"A woman in itself." That's what her hand was, he told himself—a woman in itself, in its beautiful, soft and shapely whiteness.

"My father must have placed it there—in the book," she said, removing her hand.

"It was in a Bible," he said. She smiled.

"I suppose he decided it was safe there, because nobody ever would open it." They both smiled at that.

"My father was a peculiar man," she explained. "He was always afraid of banks—would not trust them. So he left his money in all sorts of peculiar places. Why, when he died we never could find—but there, I must not trouble you with my private affairs."

"Yes, but you must, Miss Pomeroy. If I can be of any assistance to you, why——"

The troubled look came into her eyes again as she shook her head. "I'm afraid nobody can help me after what—after——"

"You mean after what happened to Masterson yesterday?" he inquired. She nodded.

"You see, it's something horrible, something I can't talk about——"

"You know who did it?" he queried.

She nodded her head slowly. "I think I can guess," she said. "But——"

"Well, if it troubles you like that, don't tell me. But I would like to be of assistance, I assure you, Miss Pomeroy——"

A sudden fear came into her face again, a ghost of terror that slipped across her face like a mask.

"Oh, I had forgotten!" she gasped. "You must go, Mr. Morley. You mustn't stay here. I am expecting some one——"

"But can't I see you again?" he persisted boldly, though his heart was beating absurdly in anticipation of her answer. Suppose she should say no!

"Yes, yes!" she answered hastily, rising. "But you must go now."

"But when?" he asked. "I feel that you are in trouble, Miss Pomeroy. I would——"

"Perhaps—but why should you be mixed up in this terrible affair?" she asked. She looked at him keenly, appraisingly. "And yet I feel that you may be able to help," she said, and his heart gave a complete somersault and landed in his throat somewhere. He could help her!

"Shall I come here to-morrow night——" he offered.

"No—not here," she said swiftly. "You must not be seen here. I'll meet you—say, at the Giltmore Hotel at seven thirty—in Peacock Alley. You can take me to dinner. Will that suit?" He nodded his head happily.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, and he heard the old woman going to the door.

"He's coming now," said the girl. "You must go!" There was a look of absolute terror in her eyes.

"But perhaps I'd better stay," he offered. "This man who is coming, he——"

"No, you must go," she said. She was leading him toward the entrance foyer now, a small, square room into which one stepped right from the hall. The door opened and the old woman admitted a tall, middle-aged man who sauntered in as though he belonged there. He and Val gazed at each other for a long moment in the foyer. He was big, but lithe as a cat for his size, and he had his hands in his pockets negligently, not even removing them when the girl spoke to him and told him to go into the living room, where she would join him presently. He bowed mockingly, looking at Morley squarely with his hard blue eyes. His mouth,

composed of two thin lips, bent down at the corners, was cruel and sensuous, Val decided, as he watched his back retreating into the living room.

"To-morrow then," he said to the girl.

She nodded her head. "Yes, to-morrow—if you still care to meet me."

"Still care—I don't care for anything else in the world, Miss Pomeroy," he insisted, and she smiled at his ardor. "To-morrow, then."

He opened the door. As he turned to take her extended hand he glanced through the drawn portières into the living room, where the big man had stationed himself at one of the windows and was inspecting the street outside. Val, looking at him, could not help a gasp of astonishment. Having removed his hands from his pockets, the man was standing with his back to them in a negligent attitude, and a singular, creepy feeling came over Val.

The strange visitor had no hands. His arms ended in two stumpy wrists.

IX

TRAILED!

VAL ordered Eddie to drive to the University Club and settled back on the cushions to discuss with himself this further aspect of the affair.

This man with no hands! Val was free to admit to himself that he did not like him, nor any part of him. There was something sinister about him that repelled, yet he held him with an air of hazy mystery. So it had been no dream, this vision he had had of an intruder whose arms ended in stumpy, sawed-off wrists. He had actually been in Val's bedroom—in fact, he had stolen the books from him.

Ah, yes, the books. Val permitted himself to consider them for an instant. Evidently they held the explanation of all this mystery. Everything seemed to revolve about them. A man is killed in order that they might be recovered. Another man is drugged to sleep and the books removed from his room. There must be a powerful motive concealed behind such developments. What was it that these commonplace enough books held that made it so important that they be recovered?

And if they were really so valuable, in fact, why had Jessica Pomeroy been so willing—even anxious, it seemed—to get rid of them? Was there a message from the dead in them? Some secret that had

gone to the grave with Miss Pomeroy's father? Val shrugged his shoulders and gave it up.

Where did the man without hands come into this, anyway? Val knew now that it was the same who had drugged him and stolen the books. That being the case, probably he could cast light upon the murder of poor old Mat Masterson. In fact, undoubtedly he could. Evidently he did not commit the murder himself—how could a man with no hands beat in another's head with a heavy, blunt instrument? But he was in the affair, that was certain.

So was Jessica Pomeroy, for that matter. He remembered now that she had thought him from the police—that she had shown fear at mention of the murder, and fear at the advent of this man, this uncanny stranger with the wicked eyes and mouth and the mutilated limbs. Yet, not being implicated herself in the murder, of course—being nothing but an innocent bystander, as it were, why should she not hand over this man to the police and let them sift the matter to the bottom?

Val decided that she could not do that. There was far more to this affair than appeared on the surface; there were things no stranger should know about; no stranger, that is, beside himself. But he had begun not to consider himself a stranger where this beautiful girl was concerned. In the two short glimpses he had had of her, she had already taken possession of his thoughts to the exclusion of almost every other subject.

What was the mystery that surrounded her? Val wondered. Probably, in some way, she was in the power of this sinister cripple. She feared him, of that he was certain; yet she did not refuse to admit him to her apartment; and, indeed, he entered as though

he belonged there—as though Jessica herself was, in some manner, his own. Could it be that he—but Val cast the thought aside. It was plain enough that Jessica loathed the man.

Well, he would learn something of all this to-morrow at dinner. He smiled as he gave himself over to reflections at what he would say to her and of what she would say to him. How she would smile at him tenderly with her eyes over the gleaming silver and shining white cloth of the dinner table at the Giltmore. He knew an alcove, somewhat away from the rest of the dining room, where they might have comparative privacy. That would be good. He could call up the Giltmore at once and reserve that table for to-morrow night.

His heart sang within him as he reflected on these matters. Here he was, young, in perfect health, beginning to enjoy life again, no financial worries of any kind except how to dispose of his abnormally large income—and now, into his life like a falling star shooting across the summer skies came Jessica Pomeroy with all her radiant beauty. And with her came mystery and adventure, murder and sudden death, messages from the dead and ten thousand dollar bills, engagements for dinner at seven thirty at the Giltmore, men with no hands . . . everything necessary, in fact, to feed the fires of romance and youth. Life was a fine proposition—there was no getting away from that. Poor old Mat Masterson!

The car swung around the corner into Fifth Avenue in its most exclusive part, and stopped at the door of the University Club. Eddie Hughes jumped off and opened the door, rousing Val from his reverie.

"Eh, what?" said Val, coming to himself. "Oh, the club, to be sure."

"Yes, sir, the club," said Eddie impassively. "Shall I wait, sir?"

"No. Go home and tell Chong I'll be home to dinner—and tell him to make it good, too." This was a joke, because Chong's cooking was the glory of Val's apartment, and no one knew this better than the suave little Oriental himself, who worshiped Val with an abiding love that was second only to the love Eddie had for his employer.

"You needn't come back, Eddie. I'll try to stagger home on foot."

"Yes, sir. Don't stagger through any dark streets, sir," replied Eddie evenly.

Val looked at him in inquiry.

"Why, what do you mean?" he asked. "Anything up that I don't know about?" Eddie, as Val well knew, was not accustomed to making remarks at random to his employer.

Eddie stepped closer and whispered. There was nobody near them, so there was no reason for whispering, but it suited the moods of both men.

"There was two men, sir." He paused and looked at Val significantly, mysteriously.

"Two men!" Val gazed at him. "You mean——"

"Yes," came back Eddie. "They followed us in a taxi. I kinda thought you might of took notice, sir, but I guess you was too busy thinking. They was hanging around across the street from our last stop, with a cab handy, and when we beat it I looked back and noticed them give 'er the gas and followed." In moments of forgetfulness Eddie always lapsed into the

dialect of the east side streets where he spent his youth.

"H-mm!" Val cleared his throat importantly. So there were mysterious men following him in taxicabs. That was good. He could have wished for nothing better. There might be adventure later—there would be fighting, and blood, and kisses—how did one manage to live until the next night; to pass the time stupidly until seven thirty of the next evening at the Giltmore Hotel and——"

"Is that all, sir?" broke in Eddie.

"All right, Eddie. You can go. I'll watch out for them."

Seated at a window of the club he watched the kaleidoscope that is Fifth Avenue and pitied the passers-by who probably lived such uneventful sordid existences that nobody shadowed them, nobody made attacks on their lives; they did not know Jessica Pomeroy, to say nothing of never having made up their minds to marry said Jessica Pomeroy—which, by the way, Val had already decided to do. For some people life was very drab and lusterless.

"Some filly, that," remarked a drawling voice next to him. He turned, roused from his reverie, and beheld Freddy Vandenburgh, who lived, thought and expressed himself only in terms of the race track. Freddy nodded to a girl getting into a machine at the curb.

"Oh, fair," admitted Val, hesitating to admit that, with the exception of one, there were any good looking girls in the world.

"I say, Val, you're just the man I wanted to see," said Freddy. "You see, I've got a good, first hand, sure-fire tip on the third race at Belmont to-morrow and——"

"Well, why don't you play it?" inquired Val, though he knew the reason as well as Freddy did.

"Well, the fact is, Val—the reason why—that is, you know, my next quarter's allowance isn't due for three weeks and——"

"What about last quarter's allowance, Freddy?"

Freddy smiled ingenuously. "The last quarter's! Ha! That's rather rich—most of it went to you when it did finally roll around. So I sort of thought——"

"You sort of thought that maybe——" Val looked at him pointedly.

"Exactly!" Freddy sighed with relief. That was just what he had thought.

"Well, there's nothing doing, Fred, old kid," he said with decision.

"Why, what do you mean, Val?" said Freddy with alarm.

"Oh, nothing," yawned Val, "except that the last time you had a tip that was sure to come through it cost me just fifteen hundred berries—too much money to put on a racehorse that won't race. The poor plug is probably running yet. I——"

"I say, Val, I didn't mean I want you to go in on this with me, you know," protested Freddy. "I just thought you might help me out with a loan, seeing I'm so short myself. This is different—this is a dead-sure thing—I got it from the owner himself. This here Jessica filly——"

"Jessica?" asked Val, sitting up with interest.

The other nodded. "Keep it quiet, though. No use everybody being in on it. Only brings the odds up, y'know. If you'd only let me have, say, five hundred, Val——"

"All right, Freddy. Five hundred it is." He pulled

out his check book. A sudden thought occurred to him. Freddy had been following the races—to the great destruction of his generous quarterly allowance—for many years. Perhaps he would know. . . .

"Freddy?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Did you ever hear of a racing man by the name of Peter J. Pomeroy?" He asked this nonchalantly, as though it was nothing to him; just something he was idly curious about. He gazed out of the window again at the passing show, pointedly careless about Freddy's reply.

"Old Pete Pomeroy? You bet I did," replied Freddy. "One of the finest." Freddy knew everybody who was anybody on the track—it would have been strange if he did not know Pomeroy.

"Why do you ask, Val, ole kid?"

"Oh, no particular reason, Freddy. What kind was he?"

"Died more than a year ago, I think—saw something about his bally demise in the papers. Awf'ly decent sort, Val—one of those old southern gentlemen. Funny thing about him—used to breed and race, both. Sort of eccentric. Afraid of banks, or something like that; say, that bird used to carry as much as a hundred thousand dollars around with him, sometimes. I've seen that much on him more than once. Had all kinds of money and figured it was just as good to him as to a bank—and not half so much of a temptation, I guess. Anyway, everybody knew he never put his money in a bank—funny, he never was held up.

"Queer duck. Had his breeding farm somewhere down in Virginia—near Old Point Comfort, y'know—I think it was a little on the other side of Hampton;

tremendous estate, and they say he had a sort of a private race track on his estate, where he used to work them out. Had a daughter, too, I think. I saw her once, five—six years ago—just out of boarding school." Val sat up again.

"His daughter?" he repeated.

The other nodded lazily. "Yeh. Funny lookin' little tike, too. Skinny legged, with freckles and ugly red hair—I say, what's up?" he asked in alarm.

Val had shut up his check book and put it in his pocket.

"Nothing," he said shortly. "Only you don't get a nickel, that's all." Ugly red hair, indeed. Freckles and skinny legs. The poor, misguided simp! Had the nerve to ask him for money, too. Why——

"Oh, I say, Val, you know you——" he broke off with a whistle, and a grin spread its way across his pleasant, weak face.

"So that's it," he said, enlightened. "The filly, eh? Well, you know, Val, she was only a kid when I saw her," he said ingratiatingly. "You know, that kind usually grow up into awf'ly fine looking girls. In fact, come to think of it, this girl's eyes were great—nicest I ever saw—white star on her forehead and—er, I mean, nice skin, and the freckles were really very fetching, if you know what I mean. She was——"

Val laughed. "Freddy, you old hypocrite, you win! Only the next time you say a girl has red hair think it over carefully before you open that fool mouth of yours. That nearly cost you five hundred dollars, and cheap at the price, too. Now, this Jessica horse—how about placing a little bet on her for me, too?"

X

"KEEP AWAY FROM THAT GIRL!"

THE coroner's inquest, the next morning at ten, was the usual humdrum bit of business where both the coroner and the police are at sea. Both Val and Sam Peters were put upon the stand, and both received rather sharp questioning concerning the young woman in the case—the girl who had sold the books which were subsequently stolen. It appeared that the entire case hinged on the robbery of the books—those which had disappeared from Val's apartment as well as those which had cost poor Mat Masterson his life.

Sam Peters, for his part, was legitimately hazy about the appearance of the girl. She had meant nothing to him—just another seller of books. They came into the store all the time—sometimes twenty or thirty a day, men and women. He was not accustomed to paying much attention to them. He gave what description he could, but it was vague and hazy.

But when it came to a hazy description, Val was the person who seemed to be able to deliver the goods. There have been hazy descriptions of women before now, but never has Val's description been surpassed for indefinite, fog-like vagueness. This is no brief for perjury, and it might be argued that Val was committing perjury. If it was perjury, he did it lightly and joyfully—let that be an extenuation, if not an

excuse. He intended no perjury, no violation of his oath. He silenced his conscience by giving the description of a young girl as she should have appeared to the usual, disinterested observer in a public book store who had no business to notice her, anyway, and who—if he did notice her, did so in a simply casual manner that took in nothing of her looks or her appearance and contented itself by noticing merely that she was a person of the opposite sex and that she was young—or of an indeterminate age, as Val testified. Indeterminate was correct, he admitted to himself. He was undetermined as to whether her age was twenty-one or twenty-two—wasn't that indeterminate?

"I'll tell the astigmatic universe that's indeterminate," he told himself, and having once more won a strategic victory over the still voice of conscience, he smiled blandly at the coroner and the coroner's jury and hoped he would be able to assist them still further. He intended, let it be said, to bring the murderer of his friend to earth, to hand him over to justice, but he did not intend to do it until matters were so arranged that it could be done without bringing a certain woman into the case. Unhampered by the police, he was sure he would be able to work swiftly and surely, considering the strands of circumstance he held in his hands—but he would not be unhampered by the police if they knew. It was simplest, then, and best, to conceal what he knew from them.

The coroner's jury brought in the usual verdict in such cases: "Death . . . violent blow . . . at the hand or hands of person or persons unknown. . . ."

Val spoke to Sam Peters in the hall. Mat's out-of-town sister was there, too, and Sam introduced him to her. Val spoke briefly to her, and an arrangement was

agreed to whereby Sam was to continue the business until the settlement of the estate, thereafter to buy the business at the price set at an appraisal by an expert.

Outside the court house Eddie Hughes waited for him with the limousine, impassive, dead to his surroundings, seemingly, yet seeing everything that might affect him or his master in any way. The afternoon had drawn to a close with the ending of the inquiry into the death of Matthew Masterson and the streets were rapidly filling with the advance guard of the homeward bound workers.

Above the boom of the great city downtown, above the noise and the crash of human industry, loomed the stark, silent shaft of the Woolworth Building, dwarfing everything in its vicinity, making the scurrying humans resemble the little ants which they really were, showing by the mere fact of its being how small human lives and human affairs were. It was a magnificent gesture of superiority, reflected Val, as he stepped towards his car.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pomeroy," said a sibilant voice at his elbow, ingratiatingly close.

Val whirled. He disliked that voice even before he saw the speaker, even before he recognized him.

It was the heavy, sinister appearing, armless man of unpleasant memory. He lounged, as Val had seen him before, his hands in his pockets, bulking huge over everybody in the neighborhood but Val, who was rather something of a human monolith himself. He must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds, yet he was not stocky—he was built in proportion to his height, and he carried his weight with the graceful ease of a mountain cat, swinging easily on his toes.

On the left side of his face, extending across his

forehead and to the roots of his hair was an ugly scar, slightly red, looking a little like a jagged streak of lightning which impresses itself on the vision in the fraction of a second before it disappears. He was dressed well and quietly, in the best of taste, and his voice, if unpleasant, was soft and well bred. The pupils of his eyes were little more than pinpoints, and the small lines around the corners of his mouth indicated a hard, determined, unscrupulous disposition, a will that would stop at nothing, that would consider no means too terrible for a desired end. All this Val noticed in an instant, before replying as he halted, one foot on the step of his car. A dangerous man, he remarked to himself. Yet how could a man with no hands be dangerous physically? he argued with himself. Val did not know, but he felt that it was possible. He was not squeamish, yet there was a physical repulsion produced in him vaguely by this man—the same sort of electric repulsion that cats produced in Val—a feeling of potential treachery.

Val decided that his age was somewhere between forty and forty-five or -six, yet he had the athletic bearing of a younger man, the upright shoulders and languid strength of an athlete in condition—or a jaguar, lazy with sleep, in the daytime. That was it—the cat family. Val definitely placed him now; the suggestion of the cat was in him, with all the cruelly latent strength and all the treachery of the cat.

"I beg your pardon?" he said coldly, a note of inquiry in his well modulated voice. "I haven't the honor——"

"I know you haven't, my young friend," broke in the older man, a little patronizingly, it seemed to Val. "You have seen me before, however, and it——"

"Yes, so I have," said Val. "Twice before——"

"Once," corrected the man with no hands.

"No, twice—once in my bedroom——"

"Surely you're mistaken," interrupted the man who had no hands, suavely, but Val noticed a slight contraction of his eyes. "I have never had the pleasure of visiting you."

Val shrugged his shoulders. "It's of no consequence," he put in. "You have something to say to me?" He looked at him inquiringly.

"If you don't mind," said the other. "It won't take you a minute."

"Well, I'm on my way uptown," offered Val. "If you'll ride up with me——"

"That'll be fine," smiled the older man.

They stepped into the car. "Home, Eddie," called out Val, and the car slid out into midstreet and hummed on its way.

They sat shoulder to shoulder, strangely and constrainedly silent for a few moments. As for Val, he had nothing to say to this man until he had spoken to Miss Pomeroy and knew what relationship there was between them. He did not know how this deformed man came into this plot, anyway. The other, on his part, seemed a bit reluctant to begin the conversation. There was something on his mind—that was evident enough; it did not appear easy to say it, however.

The limousine swung up Lafayette Street and joined a home-going stream of automobiles that must have included nearly every car in New York. From all points east, west and south, and from half a dozen diagonal intersecting streets they added themselves to the live stream, noisy, a grating of innumerable

brakes, squeaking of thousands of springs and joints, braying and shrilling of horns—

"By Jove!" said a calm voice at Val's elbow, "you would think they cost a nickel apiece." Val nodded.

"You were saying——" he began tentatively, turning to his companion.

"That I had something to say to you," completed the other. "Well, I have. It's about Miss Pomeroy—and things connected with her. Through a curious series of events, Mr. Morley, you have—to a certain extent—been drawn into matters concerning Miss Pomeroy—and myself. These affairs can be of no interest to you——"

"You're impertinent, sir," interrupted Val, turning and looking at his companion squarely. The other met his eye, gaze for gaze.

"You wouldn't say so, if you knew the circumstances. But I am not here to discuss them with you. You have seen Miss Pomeroy—I know you are to see her again." He paused for a moment.

"What if I am?" queried Val, calmly. "I'm not in the habit of permitting strangers to censor my calling list. You——"

"Only this," went on the man who had no hands calmly. "It would not be advisable for you to keep up your acquaintance with Miss Pomeroy, or to see her again. It will be well for you to withdraw from all the affairs surrounding her——"

"Are you threatening me?" Val asked this softly, but his tone was of ice, cold and brittle.

The other took his hands from his pockets—his stumps, rather, and held them up in front of him, misshapen and grotesque.

"Nonsense," he burst out. "How can I, a helpless

cripple, threaten you? You see . . .” he regarded his hands, and was silent for a moment or two.

“Then just what do you mean by——”

“Exactly what I said. You are a stranger to Miss Pomeroy—it would be well for you to remain a stranger, and not to mix into affairs that do not concern you in any way.”

“Is this a warning?” asked Val.

The other shrugged his shoulders. “It is anything you choose to make it, my young friend.”

“And if I choose to disregard it——”

“Well, we shall see what we shall see, in that event. You are young and healthy—why not remain that way?” He looked at him significantly, his scar glowing in the semi-darkness of the car like a phosphorous gash in his evil face. Val was silent—he did not choose to answer him, and after a time the man went on.

“You will find it best to take my—advice,” he sibilated above the noise of the motor. “And now, if I may leave you——”

“Stop on the corner, Eddie,” directed Val. The car grated to a halt.

Val pushed the door open. “Thank you for your advice,” he remarked calmly. “When I feel in need of any more I’ll let you know. I expect to see Miss Pomeroy to-night,” he informed him gratuitously. There was no necessity for telling him this, but Val shrewdly suspected that he already knew, so there was no harm in the parting shot.

The other shrugged his shoulders again.

“Ah, well, youth . . .” he said, almost as though he were thinking aloud. He stood on the curb and bowed his thanks in a courtly manner as the car swung off on its way uptown.

XI

DINNER, AND A BIT OF INFORMATION

More food for thought. It was beginning to look to Val as though this man, who was in this business so mysteriously and so unexplainedly, was to be a storm center around which the affair revolved. He had made it plain that Val's presence in any way was unwelcome; there had even been a veiled threat, if he continued his attentions to Miss Pomeroy.

Why did the man who had no hands desire him to keep away? Why was it so important that he had gone to the trouble personally to warn him? And now that he knew Val suspected him of having been in his room and stolen the books from him, undoubtedly he knew that Val, in his mind, implicated him in the murder of the bookseller, for there the books had been the only things taken, also—the books sold by Miss Pomeroy. That being the case he would from now on, beyond peradventure of a doubt, consider Val as more than a rival for the attention of Miss Pomeroy, if indeed they were rivals. Probably, hoped Val, he would consider him as rather a dangerous enemy. That was good; he would rather have this man an open enemy than a lukewarm acquaintance, rather a final finish fight with him than continual skirmishing and veiled attacks. One got somewhere by a fight—either one was victorious or he lost; either the spoils of victory were

his or the losses of defeat. In either event he could know where he stood.

In a ferment of imagination and anticipation he lounged in Peacock Alley and waited for the coming of the girl with the burnished copper hair.

Half a dozen times he consulted his watch. It did not seem to hasten her arrival in the least. But then, he was a bit early. If you have an appointment with a lady at seven thirty it is absurd to expect her there at seven twenty. He told himself this and contained his impatience as well as he could. It puzzled him a little too, to feel as he did about this girl. He had known women in his life, yet never had he known one to whom he reacted in this curious manner. It seemed to him as though the very fact of her being on the same earth with him touched some vibrant chord in his nature that echoed throughout his whole being. He could have told himself, of course, that he was in love—but does one fall in love with a woman whom he has seen for perhaps less than ten minutes in his whole life?

The answer to that is yes, as he admitted after a few moments' reflection. It would have been yes if the time had been ten seconds—or ten centuries—or even if he had never seen her. It was enough that, somewhere on this earth, was a woman like Jessica Pomeroy—he did not have to see her, or know her; she was simply the incarnation of an unconscious ideal he had been building up in his mind, an ideal he had created without knowing it, and here suddenly she had come to life like Galatea and he realized of a sudden that he had made her. She was everything he had pictured to himself—and suddenly she stepped down from her pedestal and became Jessica Pomeroy, who was to meet him here in a few minutes.

With this, he began to wonder whether she really would meet him; whether she would not change her mind and decide that, after all, it was best not to see him now. This produced in him no feeling of trepidation because he would have gone to her if she had not come to him—if she did not come to-night he would go to her apartment and all the world could not stop him. If she did not—

He rose hastily, because at this moment he caught a glimpse of her at the end of the long corridor, halting in slight uncertainty. The evening had turned chilly with the first approach of autumn, and she wore a blue and gold wrap above the furry collar of which her head, encased in a lacy something, peeped like a fresh field flower. He hastened down the room to meet her and she stood stock still to await his approach.

"Am I late, dear benefactor?" she asked, extending her hand to him. He bent above it and kissed the very tips of her tiny fingers—a trick he had learned in Europe and which seemed perfectly apropos when he did it.

"You will always seem late when I wait for you, Miss Pomeroy," he remarked, smiling. "The time will always be long——"

"Don't fire all your guns so early in the evening," she replied. "You will do better to keep some of them in reserve for later, Mr. Morley."

"I don't have to," he came back. "I'll make up better ones as we go along."

"I'm sure this is perfectly improper—dining with a man whom I have never actually met, isn't it?" she appealed to him.

He nodded pleasantly. "It is."

"Isn't that fine!" she ejaculated.

"Impropriety becomes the height of respectability when you indulge in it, Miss Pomeroy," he fired back. "Shall we go to the dining room?"

She nodded. "Please. I'm horribly and vulgarly hungry—I suppose you think I ought to live on hummingbirds' wings and nightingales' tongues—to judge from the things you say to me; I don't really, though," she confided to him in a low tone.

"No?" he asked, as though shocked that anything substantial in the way of food should appeal to her. "You astound me."

"No," she said. "I'm going to deal out death and destruction to oysters, filet mignon, with dozens of different kinds of vegetables and salad, ice cream——"

"That's fine; at least you know what you want. Most women don't seem to have the least idea of what they want to eat when they dine with a man. It's a relief to come across one who knows her own mind—after all, your stomach—if I may be so presumptuous to suppose you have such a thing," he smiled, "is a very personal matter."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" She smiled at him gently, and he took careful note of the dimples the smile produced in her cheeks. "And yet, I don't think we ought to stand here and discuss my—er—internal organs in such an offhand way, do you?"

"Er—well—perhaps not. We'll come to that later, perhaps." He told her this gravely.

At the door of the dining room they were met by a squad of officials, respectful and obsequious, prominent among whom were the head waiter and the manager. The Morley name was a potent factor where it was known, which accounted for the ceremonial parade—almost like a coronation procession—that proceeded

through the dining room to a sheltered alcove where a table laid for two, decorated with just the proper flowers, awaited them.

"You must feel like a feudal baron," she whispered to him, "to whom everything comes as a matter of right."

He smiled. "I feel like an animated National Bank, to tell you the truth."

"Yet money has its uses," she smiled, when they were seated.

He nodded. "So I've been led to believe," he said. "I don't know, really—I've always had it, you know—so perhaps I don't actually realize what it means. There are times when I've found it to be more of a disadvantage than—but we'd better order first and talk later. I'm sure you must be perfectly starved."

"I am," she admitted. "Don't forget the oysters."

They chatted idly for awhile, until the first part of the dinner was finally served. It made little difference to Val what they talked about—rather, what she talked about. It was enough for him that he heard her voice; that he was sitting opposite her at table, that they were eating together, living a small fraction of their lives together, with each other. Externals hardly mattered; here was his woman—and at present she was with him to the exclusion of the whole world.

Something of what he was thinking must have flashed into her mind like the ghost of a shadow—it must have been as intangible and as nebulous as that, because Val himself had not realized concretely the thoughts that were running through his mind. She looked at him, serious for perhaps the first time that evening—an appraising glance, a glance that took in every part of him, that seemed to dissect him, almost; her glance at

him—for it was but during the merest part of a second that she looked at him frankly, was almost calculatingly cold in its process of weighing this man who sat opposite her. For that instant it almost seemed as though she looked at him not as a man who was there because he was interested in her, but as a tool that a workman finds ready to his hand, a sword a soldier finds conveniently placed so that he can use it.

"Curious that we should meet like this, isn't it?" She looked at him with frank approval now—he had been weighed in that instant. "I mean," she went on in a small sudden panic, afraid that it would seem to him that their juxtaposition was appearing very fateful and important in her eyes, "it's funny how people meet, isn't it. Just an accident—and there you are."

He did not answer for an instant, while he bit into an olive with his fine, even white teeth.

"All meetings are like that," he said when he did break the silence. "People meet—they must meet some way—by the most trivial sort of chances, by the most ordinary sort of accidents. When you look back on it later you say that it is curious you meet by just such an accident or chance—but if you look back on any acquaintance you have you will find it was an ordinary accident that brought you together—just the chance of your having been somewhere together—at the same time—and somebody there to introduce you, perhaps; life is made up of just such 'accidents'—we go rushing along in our mad careers, like funny, busy little bugs, until, by chance, we bunk into each other—which is the first time we ever really haul off and take a good square look. And then we say we met by accident, and we don't realize that an accident is the only way we can ever meet. Every formal introduction is an accident,

isn't it? The accident of you all being there at that time——"

"Sometimes we're there purposely, Mr. Pomeroy, aren't we?" He had to smile at this.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "As when we spend a couple of days hunting up the owner of a name in a bible—but don't forget that the accident of our meeting came before that—in the bookstore." He was silent for a moment or two after that, because both of them suddenly realized that there was much to be explained; the thought of the bookstore brought that back.

Her face had become sober and serious again, reflective, almost—as one who has been brought back to business with a sharp turn.

"I had made up my mind to be bright and happy for once, this evening," she said;—"I was going to forget about—oh, about things, for awhile—pretend I haven't anything to worry about."

"Acting, eh," he commented. She nodded her head quickly.

"That's just it—you know, I want to go on the stage—I have to, in fact; got to make a living some way; that's why I was holding on to all these expensive clothes when I could have sold them and——"

"You know, Miss Pomeroy," he said seriously, "you don't have to tell me this unless you want to—unless it relieves your mind to have somebody to talk to. I'm not asking you, mind."

"Oh, I know—but I haven't anybody to tell things to," she said, a little troubled. "Perhaps, if I had a girl friend——" she was silent for a moment. "But even girl friends, you know, don't always quite answer the purpose. There's nothing in the world so satisfy-

ing to a woman as a man friend—a real friend with whom she can talk out her troubles and to whom——"

"I hope that you will be able to feel that I'm such a friend, Miss Pomeroy," he broke in.

"That's the singular part of it, don't you know," she said smiling. "I've felt —that you were from the moment I saw you at my apartment—even before you spoke a word." He smiled, much gratified.

This was a discerning girl, he decided. She knew a regular fellow when she saw one. A real he-man! One of nature's noblemen! True-blue. No, he was not conceited nor egotistical beyond the ordinary run of males—when you consider that all of them are like that. Although a man would never admit that he thinks such thoughts as the above, yet all of them do. There are few men who don't consider that they are the salt of the earth and nature's noblemen—and there are none who would not be grateful to a woman for being discerning enough to perceive that important fact.

"I suppose I ought to begin at the beginning," she said, and he nodded. "Though we're having a peep at the end right now——"

"The way some women read a book, eh?" he commented.

"Well, not all. Some don't read—they live. The beginning," she went on, "is my father. Probably you know of him—he was a racing man. That is, he bred horses, and he raced them—going around the country to wherever there was a meet. You can't have a home —in the true sense of the word—when your only living relative is always off somewhere at the other end of the country, so we lived, when we weren't separated, in a small apartment hotel here in the city. We had a place in Virginia, too, near Hampton—but the build-

ings are about ready to cave in and nobody has lived there for twenty years—not since my mother died there. The house itself has been locked up, although we stayed a few times at one of the cottages on the property, on account of father's stable being there, and his horses. He had a kind of a race track there where there used to be try-outs.

"I spent all of my girlhood and most of my young womanhood in boarding and finishing schools and I only came home for good a few months before my father's death last year. I never was very intimate with my father—in fact, I don't think I saw enough of him to become intimate with him. He was a peculiar sort—that is, much different from most people. He came into a large fortune when he attained his majority—in Virginia. He turned it all into cash, preparatory to making an investment, and placed it all in the bank.

"The details of the investment took two or three months to complete. In the meantime, the bank failed. Creditors received about two cents on the dollar—it completely wiped out my father's fortune. Well, he made two or three more before he was through—but, as I told you, he never trusted banks after that, and he always kept his money and his valuable papers—stocks and bonds—hidden away or on his person. More than once he carried over a hundred thousand dollars with him in large bills, to my knowledge. He always had many thousands of dollars with him.

"Well, as I say, he recouped. He always loved horses, so I suppose it was perfectly natural to go in for them as a business. At one time it was said that he had the largest blooded stable in America. A few months before he died he turned it all into cash, keep-

ing only the Virginia estate, and retired from the business. I did not see him at his death—I was traveling in Europe with a companion; he died suddenly, from a stroke of apoplexy, lapsing into unconsciousness and regaining consciousness only a few seconds before he died. Ignace Teck was with him. He——"

"Ignace Teck?" queried Val. "Who is he?"

"You've seen him—the man who called at my place yesterday when you were there. He——"

"The man without hands?"

She nodded. "The man without hands—I didn't know you saw that. He usually keeps his hands in his pockets when strangers are present."

She was silent for a moment, unaccountably. So was Val—he was wondering who this Ignace Teck was, with his hard, sinister countenance, his small, cruelly calculating eyes. She played with a crumb on the table, the long lashes fringing her eyes like willow at the edge of a pond, but he noticed that her slender hand trembled just a little as her fingers continued their aimless playing. Evidently there was a great deal about this man for one to know, thought Val. Ignace Teck! The very name sounded ominous. He broke the silence at last, seeing that if he did not there was scarcely any telling when she would resume—and he was interested in her recital—interested in the liquid cadences of her voice.

"Just who is this man?" he asked finally, making his voice as careless as possible. "Where does he come into this thing, anyway?"

Her hands ceased their playing with the breadcrumbs and her eyes no longer shaded by the lashes, looked directly into his for a brief instant. Then, slowly, in a voice as hard as flint, and as dry as a country road in summer, she answered him briefly.

"He is my fiancé," she said.

XII

THE MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

The ancient Greeks had a word for it—*peripetia.* In dramatic usage of the present day it has become peripety. When the man who has been suspected of the murder all through three acts suddenly, at the end of the play, turns out to be the hero-detective in disguise who finds the real girl and marries the murderer —er—finds the real murderer and marries the girl— or when the poor suitor, who has been scorned by the family because of his poverty, suddenly turns out to be William Q. Rockerbilt, the richest man in the world —or when the supposed hero suddenly is unmasked as a villain of the deepest dye—that is a peripety, the sudden, surprising reversal of fortune that sends you home happy at eleven o'clock, making you forget about the eight eighty you had to pay for the tickets. The reversal must be sudden and unexpected, but it can be in either direction, happy or horrible.

Val was at this instant the center point of a peripety, and it is quite unnecessary, perhaps, to state in which direction the thing worked. It was horrible. In fact, he was peripettied almost into a dazed unconsciousness by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the thing. Of course, he had vaguely supposed that so lovely a girl would have masculine affiliations of one kind or another—he knew all men were not blind. But this man! Really, you know, it was a bit thick. He

lived an eternity or two in Purgatory in the instant or two that followed the moment when old Battling Peripetia hauled off and swung his right to the jaw.

He just simply sat there and watched the room go round and round, the while he fought for his breath. Through the haze that was in front of his eyes he heard her voice, and suddenly he was sitting quietly in front of Jessica Pomeroy in the restaurant, and he was cold and calm. It had lasted but an instant, but he had learned what it was to suffer as he had never suffered in the trenches. When love hits a man of Val's type the naked little rascal has a haymaker in either mitt—and he had landed fair and square on Val.

"Does that surprise you?" she was saying, calmly. A shade of feeling flickered through her expressive eyes before she shaded them again with her silken lashes; he was sure of that. Ah, well, she wasn't married yet. That was something.

"Yes, a little, of course—from what I know of him——" he began.

"You mean from what you suspect of him," she corrected him, and he thought her tone was a trifle stiff and cold; unnecessarily so, it seemed to him.

"Well, suspect, then," he admitted. "How did he lose his hands?" he asked.

"He saved my life when I was a six year old child," she enlightened him. "I had fallen in front of a runaway horse dragging a heavy, loaded truck. He jumped in front and threw me aside, but lost his balance before he could quite jump aside himself—he fell —both hands together, you know, in front of him—the horse missed him but the terribly heavy wheels of the truck went over his hands, crushing them. They had to be amputated." She was silent again, and he did

not speak, letting this sink in. There was more to this than he had thought.

He had thought for a moment that perhaps this cripple had so frightened her that . . . But it was more than that, he saw. There was a debt of gratitude to be paid, and she was paying it with the only thing she had—herself. It was a big price—too big, he decided. A shade of this must have flickered across his mobile countenance, because she spoke to his unuttered thought.

"Well, of course, it is partly, gratitude—it would have to be," she told him frankly. "There are other things, though . . . Things I cannot speak to you about. He was working for my father then—sort of an assistant manager of the stables, you know. My father kept him on all these years, until his death, as a confidential man—he often said he owed him more than he could ever repay. I think it became a sort of obsession with him in his last days, because he made me promise to marry Ignace."

"And you were willing to——"

"I had to," she said. "I would have done anything for my father—even marry Ignace Teck. Even though——"

"Even though you loathe him and are afraid of him?" he asked.

She nodded. "I am afraid of him—I don't know why I should tell you all this, Mr. Morley—there is something about him, an intimation of cruelty—I know he's unscrupulous and hard. He revolts me, at times—and then at other times he is a charming gentleman and I could almost bring myself to like him. But he's a man who will go to any lengths to accomplish his ends. Yet I'll marry him—eventually," she said.

They lapsed into silence for a brief moment. She went on, then.

"But to get back to the story," she said. "After my father's death we could discover no trace of his money or other personal property. There must have been a great deal of it, because he had no debts—he paid everything cash—and he had just sold his stables. Ignace thought there must have been half a million dollars, somewhere."

"Do you think so?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Somewhere, my father has hidden away a great deal of money. As I said, he was a trifle queer in his last years—in fact, I think that on the subject of Ignace Teck and also on the subject of his money, he was unbalanced. He always had an idea that people wanted to take it from him—and he hid it in the most peculiar places; you know, like that ten thousand dollar bill you found. But the great bulk of it has not been uncovered, although we have looked almost everywhere. Frankly, I think it's the money Ignace is after, more than he is desirous of marrying me, even. He and his gang——"

"His gang?"

"He's an assistant district leader on the east side—he lives there in a shabby tenement when he's in town—and he has men from the district who would do anything for him—commit robbery—murder, even——"

Val nodded his head. "Then you think poor old Mat Masterson——"

"Probably," she acquiesced. "Oh, it is horrible to think of it!" she exclaimed. A shudder passed through her and her face grew white as death as the matter was recalled to her mind. "The bookseller had what Ignace wanted, so——"

"The books!" broke in Val. "Why was it so important for him to get the books back?"

"That's what I don't know," she shook her head. "Perhaps he thinks they contain some clue to where the money is—but if that is so, why did he not take them long ago—I had them with me all that time?"

"Maybe it just occurred to him?" suggested Val. She nodded.

"You know, I was absolutely broke when you came in with that ten thousand dollars," she said. "You see, father left practically nothing—as far as we could ascertain. I had to move out from the hotel where we lived—though he wanted me to stay there—and take a cheaper place. My cash got lower and lower. I could have got money from Ignace, but I wouldn't take any of his money, of course. At last I went really bankrupt," she smiled, "and there was nothing in the house for Elizabeth and me to eat. Elizabeth is the old woman who answered the door for you—she's been with us for years, and she's staying on, though she knows I have no money to pay her. I would have tried to sell some of my expensive clothes and furs," she said, "but I'm trying to get on the stage and a wardrobe is a very handy thing to have. So I thought I'd get a little for the books—they've been around the house a long time and they really were a nuisance, you know. We never had much in the way of books in the house, because I was away all the time and my father was not much of a reader. So I had no bookcase, and they were in the way. I thought it would be a good time to get rid of them—and so stall Ignace off a little while longer—you see," she said naïvely; "he wanted me to marry him right away, and if I was starving I would have had to do it. And then you

came along with that ten thousand dollars like a bolt from the blue—it put a different aspect on life entirely. I can pay off the mortgage."

"What mortgage?" he inquired.

"On our Virginia place. A long time ago, when my father had some legal trouble, he thought that if he lost the case they might take away his property, so he protected the Virginia place by a mortgage for seven thousand dollars which he gave to Ignace Teck—it's really worth many times that, you know. Now Ignace is foreclosing the mortgage—not because he wants the place so badly, but because he always had an idea that dad's money was hidden somewhere down there; there are thousands of acres on the estate, and there's lots of room for it. He's getting the idea that I don't want to marry him, and he figures that if he owns the Virginia estate he can shut me out of it and look for the money at his leisure. The action isn't finished yet—which is why you were so much of a godsend. I've already sent enough money down to my lawyers in Norfolk to fix the matter up."

"But surely you don't intend to marry this man?" inquired Val, leaning forward.

"Why not?" she answered coolly. "I promised to." It was a statement of fact, as though there were no other course, yet Val was glad to see the flush of color that had come up into her cheeks and the emotion that caused her to veil her eyes once more.

"Well," he said slowly and deliberately, "he's a murderer, you know."

She paled at this, though she had probably thought on the matter many times since it had first occurred to her. But she answered coldly.

"I don't know that he is," she said, with a womanly inconsistence.

"But if you knew——" he persisted.

"If I knew . . ." she turned away from him and seemed to be peering into the face of the future. It was as though he was not there, but her words were like a caress in their soft modulation, like a song dying down the wind. "If I knew . . ."

"Where does he live?" he asked abruptly.

She mentioned a number on the East Side. "Why do you want to know?" she asked quickly, as though repenting that she had given him this information. He made a mental note of the number before answering.

"Well, I thought that if I could bring you proof that he had the books you might be willing to believe——"

She interrupted him with a note of alarm in her voice. "Oh, I'm sorry I told you where he lives—I shouldn't have done that! You mustn't go there, Mr. Morley! It would be terrible——"

"But why?" he asked. "Surely I cannot be hurt by a man with no hands. Even if he did find me——"

"It isn't he, you know. It's the gangsters he has around him. They would do anything—oh, you have no idea what a vicious crew they are. Why, if——"

"Well, don't worry," soothed Val, pleased and flattered that she should be alarmed over the question of his comparative safety. "Why, there is no reason under the sun——"

"Miss Pomeroy?" questioned an utterly respectful voice at his elbow. They both looked up, and until that moment they had not realized how completely absorbed they had been in one another. It had been as though they were in some private place, as though

nobody else in the world existed. They, each of them, actually had to wrench away their gaze.

"I have a note for you, if you will pardon me," continued the head waiter, looking at Miss Pomeroy. "A boy delivered it and told me it was important."

He handed her the note. She took it, thanking him mechanically, and he withdrew, rubbing his hands in cadence one over the other.

With an apology to Val she ripped open the envelope and read the missive swiftly; her face became pale as ashes and her breath came more quickly in the tremor of her alarmed emotions. He noticed these symptoms of fright as she read, and it was difficult to resist the feeling that the proper move for him was to take her in his arms and quiet and soothe her. If it had not been a public place. . . .

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked softly.

"Oh, I must go at once—it's important!" she ejaculated. "It's from——"

"Can you tell me what it's about?" he inquired. "Of course, if there's anything I can——"

"No, I think there's nothing you can do, Mr. Morley," she broke in. "I—I think I can't tell you—now—what it's all about, but I must go at once." They both rose.

"Perhaps I can help you," he persisted. "You know, I would like nothing better than——"

"You're very good, Mr. Morley, but I can't call upon you in this particular case. It's—it's all right—there's no help needed. I was foolish to be so alarmed. It's from Ignace, and he's at my house—I must go back at once."

He stepped up close to her, so close that they al-

most touched, where he towered above her like a good natured rock.

"I want you to promise me, Miss Pomeroy, that if you need assistance of any kind, you will call upon me. Any time of the day or night, any place——"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Morley," she breathed softly. "It will be good to know that. I promise. You'll come any time——"

"All you have to do is send for me, Miss Pomeroy. I'll break all records coming to you. Now, let me send you home in my car—it's waiting outside."

"No, you had better call a taxi for me," she decided, shaking her head dubiously. "I think it would be wiser for neither you nor your car to be seen near my apartment for awhile."

XIII

THE FIGHT FOR THE BOOKS

For a space Val sat in the onyx and gold lobby of the Giltmore and consumed numerous cigarettes, the while he decided on his course of action. For action it had to be; he was not the man to take a passive part in the melodrama that was wrapping itself around the woman he loved. Here was love and adventure.

He knew that Jessica Pomeroy was determined on her course; he could see that she had a high sense of duty and obligation—and if her duty and her sense of obligation led her even to the point of marrying the loathsome object that had no hands, why, she would do it. He knew that. It was not a question of whether she cared for him, Valentine Morley. How could a perfect creature like Jessica Pomeroy care for an ordinary man like him?

But he would make her care! And the first way to do that was to release her from her assumed obligation to marry this Ignace Teck. She had intimated that if it was proved to her that he had murdered Mat Masterson she would reconsider her determination—she would not be bound to marry a murderer. But how to prove that?

He considered this for a short time and it came to him suddenly. Why, what a fool he had been! By the books, of course.

"If I can find out that he has the books," quoth Val, "it stands to reason that he must be implicated in the murder of poor old Mat—and it's a sure thing he has 'em." He was thankful that he had found out his address from Miss Pomeroy. That would help. If he had the books they were very probably in his apartment on the East Side.

There, then, was where Val must look. There was another important reason for getting those books. Very possibly there was a clue in them, somehow, to the lost wealth of the girl's father. Otherwise, why should Teck be so anxious to get them back that he would even commit murder for them? That money belonged to Jessica Pomeroy, and Val decided that it was up to him to see that she got it.

Lost treasure! The love of a beautiful woman! The dark villainy of an unscrupulous scoundrel! It was good to be alive and to be caught up in the swirl of this affair. Val's blood tingled in his veins, and he rose hastily, smiling gently. There was no time like the present. Ignace Teck, to be sure, was at Jessica's —he called her that privately—home. That being the case, what was there to prevent Val from making a raid on the handless one's rooms. Nothing. Teck had done that to him, so there was no ethical reason why he should not now return the compliment.

He walked out of the Giltmore and engaged Eddie Hughes in conversation.

"Eddie," he said, "haven't we got an automatic or two somewhere?"

Eddie brightened. He nodded. "At home," he answered laconically. "Whom do you want croaked?"

"Nobody," grinned Val. "We might need them for protection, though. Let's go home and get them."

He jumped in. "Hustle," he shouted. The car turned the corner on two wheels and nearly ran down a traffic policeman. It was out of sight before the policeman had a chance to reach into his pocket and pull out a summons.

"Well, I might be needin' it fer somewan else," muttered the guardian of the city's traffic. He kept it out where he could get to it again quickly in case it was necessary.

"I'm going to burgle a little to-night, Eddie, "announced Val. He was sitting with the driver, in front. Eddie looked at him impassively. Nothing that his amazing employer said to him startled him. He could have announced that he was going to work and it would scarcely have shocked the callous, impervious Eddie.

"That's not included in your contract, Eddie, so you can stay in the apartment and keep the home fires burning until I get back," he continued. "Not that I don't think the exercise wouldn't do you some good. A little night work, such as I propose——"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I decline to stay home," interrupted Eddie. "If you think that I'm going to slave my life away for you and then, when there is a chance for a little recreation, be left at home like a cook, why——"

"You're waxing impertinent, Edward," said Val severely. "I really ought to discharge you. Your recommendations said nothing about your being a good burglar. How do I know that you're any good at the job—this is something that requires experience. You can get a good chauffeur or valet anywhere, but where can you get an efficient burglar? Eddie, have you ever burgled?"

"No, sir," replied Eddie. "But I'm willing to learn."

"Ah, my boy, you have struck on the keynote of our American life. The reason America has forged ahead so fast is because Americans are willing to learn. We have no deep rooted prejudices to eradicate—if anything worthwhile comes along, like burgling, or pinochle, we are 'willing to learn,' " he went on growing expansive. "It is what has made us what we are to-day——"

"What are we to-day, sir?" asked Eddie mildly. Val turned and looked at him in astonishment.

"Why, we are—er—we are—damn it! Eddie, don't you read your history and your newspapers. Why, we are—Eddie, I sincerely trust you are not being insolent enough to poke fun at me or at our institutions."

"No, sir," replied Eddie. "About this—er—burgling job, then, we can consider that I am going along, sir, I take it?" He noted the look of indecision in Val's face, the while he missed a truck by an inch. Val saw no particular reason for exposing Eddie Hughes to whatever dangers there were attending this job. "Of course," went on Eddie, "if you refuse, and thus make it necessary for me to notify the police of your—er—midnight exercise, why, it will be——"

"Pinked!" ejaculated Val. "I'll come down. Eddie, you're one of us to-night. But if you get killed, don't blame me."

"I won't, sir," said Eddie.

"Ah—very good, Eddie! Now that you're a member of the party, I'll tell you what I propose to do."

He told and Eddie listened without comment.

"How does it look to you?" he inquired at the conclusion of the recital of his proposed deeds.

"All right, sir," returned his man. "Except that it

seems to me that it would be better if we went in a taxicab, because this big car is sure to attract attention if we leave it standing for any length of time in that East Side street. And then, we can have the cab and the chauffeur waiting for us with the engine running, so that we can get away on the jump when we come out. We might be in a hurry, sir," he suggested.

Val nodded. "You've struck twelve, Eddie." They were home now. "Put the car away and get a taxi. I'll go upstairs and get the guns."

. . . . . .

At about ten thirty that evening a taxicab carrying Val and Eddie came to a grinding stop at the corner of a small, narrow, ill-smelling alley.

"Are we there?" asked Val, popping his head out of the door.

"Dunno," replied the driver. "I think it's around here somewhere, though. Maybe one of these fellers can tell us. Hey!" he called to them.

A small tough came forward, unshaven, rat faced, and sharp, beady eyes that seemed to look in two different directions at once. His derby, which was too small for him, a sort of brown bowler, was perched perilously on one side of his unkempt hair, and he spat viciously into the gutter under the taxicab before opening his mouth to speak.

"Whatcher want?" he asked, eyeing the occupants of the taxicab sharply, and then addressing himself to them.

"Can you tell me where 22 Delancey Place is?" asked Val.

The other looked at him searchingly for an instant. "Dis here's Delancey Place," he replied. "Yer num-

ber's at de other end. What name you lookin' fer?" he asked, with an assumption of confidential familiarity.

"Why?" asked Val.

The other did not meet his direct gaze. He spat again, this time on the hub of the taxi's rear wheel, and regarded his marksmanship admiringly for a moment or two before answering.

"Oh, nothin'," he said at length. "Just thort I might help you, dat's all." Val gave him a quarter, which he accepted in a dignified manner, much as a shopkeeper accepts money for merchandise. He turned and went back to lounge with his friends, paying no more attention to Val and his party.

Telling the taxi driver to wait for them there, and to be ready to start at an instant's notice, Val and his man proceeded up the alley to number 22, Eddie carrying a suitcase in which to take away the books, if they found them. Val had his plans made, sketchily. They were simply this: To knock on the door. If Teck was in, which was not likely, they were to enter and by a show of force search his rooms. If he was not in, they were to find a way to force their entrance into the rooms. That was all. The legality of the proceeding, to say nothing of the danger of it, did not bother Val in the least, and it bothered Eddie less. He was satisfied, if Val was. If his conscience smote him a bit—that is, Val's conscience, for Eddie had none except in Val's name—he silenced it by the reflection that after all, they were his own books and they had been stolen from him. As the English say, he was merely getting back "a bit of his own."

It was a mean looking alley, Delancey Place, and no mistake. Early, comparatively, as it was, the sidewalks of Delancey Place were bare and deserted. With

the exception of one lamppost burning bleakly at the beginning of the alley, there were no lights. Windows were barred and although here and there a shaft of yellow light escaped through a ramshackle shutter, it did little but accentuate the general gloom and dispiritedness of the place. It was a location to take the heart out of a man who had no legitimate business there—nor did it look, on the other hand, as though any one who lived there could have any legitimate business.

They found the house they were looking for at the far end; it was a three-story frame house—one of the few frame houses still in existence on the East Side. There was no front door, though the hinges were still there to show that at some happier and far distant time there had been such an affair at the entrance. The hall yawned blackly before them.

"Got your flash?" queried Val. The other handed it to him. "Looks like midnight inside a cow's belly," commented Val.

"Yes, sir," replied Eddie, impassively.

They entered the house. By working his flashlight diligently, Val discovered that there was a door to an apartment on each side of the hall. He knocked on one of them, loudly. There was no answer. He knocked again. There was a sound of moving around, and he heard a low, guttural, feminine voice cursing wholeheartedly. The door was opened a crack, as far as a stout chain would permit.

"Can you tell me where Teck lives?" asked Val.

"One flight up, on the left, in the rear," grunted the woman, and banged the door. People evidently did not keep their doors open any longer than they could help in this neighborhood, meditated Val. Ah,

well. It occurred to him that if he lived there he wouldn't have kept his door open any longer, either.

They made their way up the creaking, uncovered stairs, with the aid of the invaluable flashlight. A musty, filthy smell, the fetid, odorous accumulation of many years' cooking, a composite smell of perhaps thirty years standing, greeted their nostrils. On the wall, to the left of the stairs, the plaster had come off in great gobs, exposing the bare lath underneath. At the head of the stairs, to the left, they found the door they were looking for.

"This must be it, sir," whispered Eddie.

"Correct," whispered Val. He knocked softly. There was no answer, as he had expected.

He knocked again, louder this time. Still no answer.

"Where's that cold chisel?" he asked in a whisper. Eddie produced it silently and handed it to him.

"Now for a little plain and fancy burgling," announced Val. "A moving picture entitled 'Breaking the Law' in six parts." The door did not fit well. Probably, at the beginning, many years before, it had fitted snugly, but that day was long years agone. It was badly warped by now and it was a simple matter to find room for the chisel. There was a sharp straining of wood against iron, a dull rasping sound, another push, and the door swung open.

"If this is the burglar's art," said Val, "it's very easy. "They entered the room silently, and the flashlight showed them that it was a fairly large living room, with another smaller room, probably a bedroom, on one side. In a moment or two he made certain that there was nobody in the apartment.

He located the gaslight in the center of the room.

"Close the door and pull down the shades, Eddie, and I'll light up so we can have a look around." Eddie did so, and Val lighted the gas.

They were surprised at the comfort and good taste shown in the furnishing of the room. The room they had entered was evidently a combined living room and library, with deep leather chairs, a reading lamp, a walnut library table, and rather fine prints and etchings on the walls. The first thing that struck Val's attention, however, was a bundle of books on the library table. Even before he advanced to them he knew that they were the ones he was looking for.

"Ah, we have with us to-day, Eddie, pieces of eight, doubloons and Spanish gold, as exemplified in yon books—maybe," he waved his hand to the books. He looked them over briefly, perfunctorily. A second glance told him that he was correct.

"Are they the ones?" asked Eddie. Val nodded.

Eddie opened the suitcase and placed the books within carefully. "Let's go."

"Right—oh! Let us stagger homeward, my good man," smiled Val. "Sorry we cannot wait until our good friend, Iggy Teck, comes back. It would be nice to visit him, but——"

The door opened silently, and four men stood in the door, quiet, grim, revolvers leveled. Only one spoke. It was the little cross-eyed man who had directed them to this address.

"Reach fer a cloud, men," he said. "Grab yerself a star!"

"I take it that you mean——" began Val.

"Damn right, kid!" snapped the gangster. "Stick

'em up—an' don't let me have ter tell yer again, neither."

Slowly Val's hands went up into the air. "To what are we indebted for the honor of this—er—visitation," he asked. "You didn't—er—send up your cards, nor were you announced by the butler," he bantered, sparring for time, but his eyes were contracted to pinpoints and his square jaw had hardened angularly.

"Never mind all that guff," ordered the gangster. "Stand right where you are and be quiet. Come in, boys," he called to the rest of the gang. "Keep them up there, you!" he directed Eddie, who was standing a little to the left of Val and had shown signs of being tired of the position. "If this here cannon goes off, you're liable ter git an awful headache, t'say nothin' of catchin' cold account 'er th' air bein' let through yer."

"Just what can I do to oblige you boys?" asked Val pleasantly. "If there is any little thing I can do, any little favor, why, just say the word——"

"Yes, yer kin keep mum an' move over here till I relieves yer of any stray gats yer may have about yer poison, git me?" Val nodded, his hands up in the air, and half turned to glance at Eddie, who had remained suspiciously quiet and immobile. Their eyes met, and in that brief glance he told him to be ready to jump for it at an instant's notice—to hold himself prepared for anything.

The men gathered around them as Val moved forward the center of the room, right under the gas jet. He made a motion as though to lower his hands,

"Keep dem fins up a minit you!" ordered the little

unshaven tough sharply. Like lightning Val's hands shot up. He had gauged the distance exactly, and his right hand came in contact with the cock of the gas jet. With a snap of his fingers he turned it, leaving the room in instant black darkness.

"Jump for it, Eddie!" he shouted, jumping from his own place instantly. It was well that he did so, because the blackness of the room was punctured by a vivid barking flash as a gun went off, filling the room with acrid smoke.

In an instant the six men in the room were a tangle of striking arms and legs, each fearing to shoot, not knowing which was friend and which was foe. With a fearful, vivid joy, Val and Eddie plunged into the mass, striking, throwing aside, kicking.

Val picked up a cursing body and threw it, knocking down furniture and men. He jumped into the thick of the struggling humans, pounding viciously with his ham-like fist and his revolver butt. At the door the mix-up was thickest. A figure jumped at Eddie. There was the sharp crack of a human fist on bone, and the man slumped down unconscious, as clean a knockout as was ever made.

"Through the door, boss!" shouted Eddie.

"Righto!" shouted Val, plunging for the entrance. A figure blocked his way. He picked it up and threw it through the door. It struck the stairs half way down and rolled on.

"Now for it, young feller me lad!" shouted Val. Down the stairs they plunged, Val and Eddie. A revolver barked three times after them, but they felt nothing. The doors in the apartments were closed—it was not a good time to open doors.

Out into the street they burst, both of them, with a couple of shouting men in pursuit. New figures popped out of doors and took up the chase.

"To the taxi, Eddie!" shouted Val.

"Yes, sir," returned Eddie, and fifty yards ahead of their pursuers, they made speed. They rounded the corner to the car.

The corner was bare of automobiles. The taxi had gone.

They glanced back for an instant. The pursuit was hot, and the pursuers' numbers had been augmented.

"Stop thief!" some one shouted, and the neighborhood, which a moment before had been silent and slumberous, suddenly became a living maelstrom of humanity, swirling, streaming after the fugitives.

"To the subway, Mr. Morley!" panted Eddie. They turned at an acute angle and headed for the subway kiosk, two blocks away.

Through the night streets of the East Side they thundered, with the crowd after them, but nobody stopped their progress because, in the excitement, Val had forgotten to put away his gun, and he was still brandishing it as he ran. At last, still fifty yards to the good, they reached the kiosk.

Down the stairs they clattered, only to see the tail lights of a train pulling out. Too late!

A thunderous noise made itself heard in the tunnel.

"The other side!" panted Eddie. "There's a train coming in."

They leaped over the turnstiles, jumped down to the tracks, and scrambled up on the other side just as a train thundered in, missing them by little more than the proverbial hair. The doors of the train opened,

Val and Eddie, the only oncoming passengers, entered, and the gates clanged shut again. The bell rang the length of the car, and with a grinding of flat wheels, the train started. Through the glass of the car platform Val and Eddie could see the foremost of the pursuing gang plunge into the station and look up and down for their quarry.

Val kissed his hand to them as the train pulled out.

"Rather close, what!" commented Val, and for the first time he was able to turn to Eddie. He gave a gasp of surprise.

In his hand Eddie Hughes held carefully the suitcase containing the books they had gone after.

. . . . . .

Before a crackling blaze in the grate Val sat sunk deep in an easy chair, examining the books which were strewed around him. He was feeling better, more exhilarated with life, than he had felt for many a day. To-morrow he would have something to tell Jessica Pomeroy. He recounted to himself the several aspects of the story he would have to tell her. It was good. She could hardly keep on with Ignace Teck, now that he——"

"Anything more to-night, sir?" asked Eddie respectfully, at the door. Val half turned.

"Nothing, Eddie, except that you're a good boy and in my report to G.H.Q. I'll recommend you for conspicuous coolness and daring under fire. You ought to get a citation for it, you know."

"Yes sir. Very good, sir," grinned Eddie impassively.

"Good night, Eddie," said Val.

"Good night, sir." He went to his room.

Val turned to the books again. Carefully he went through the one he held in his hand, page by page. It was a volume of E. P. Roe's.

"Imagine finding anything worth while in this!" he muttered, and threw it aside to pick up another. For half or three quarters of an hour he sat before his fire, going through book after book. Not knowing what he was looking for, he found nothing. He could not seem to get on the track of anything that looked promising.

It was a puzzle, but he did not have the key. It would have been hard enough even if he had known what he wanted, but he did not know even that. He had decided that the books had something to do with the money that old Peter Pomeroy had cached somewhere—but in what way? That he could not tell, and the books he had examined left him just as much in the dark.

Now, if he only could unearth that money and hand it over to Jessica Pomeroy! The thought of the name brought him around to her, and he smiled gently. Was there ever a girl like her before? There was not, he decided. She was the recapitulation of the eternal beauty of the world.

And the way she had smiled at him to-night at times! Why, it was like spring coming suddenly on a cold winter's day, the sun breaking through a bleak cloud, flowers poking their gay heads through the snow blankets, stars in June skies, oases—was that the proper plural?—in the Sahara, a fugitive moment of happiness——

At this stage the telephone rang insistently. He

turned impatiently to the offending instrument, exasperated at being interrupted just at the moment when he was about to think of the best figure of speech of all. But Eddie had retired to a well earned rest and he had to answer the call himself. He picked up the receiver.

It was the hall boy. "There's a man wants to see you, sir?" came to him over the wires.

"To see me—at this time of night?" queried Val. "What's he want?"

"I don't know, sir. He's a chauffeur and he says he has an important message for you personally."

"Well, send him in," directed Val, putting down the receiver.

An important message for him at this time of night! There was only one thing that was important enough to break the night for him, and that was—— Why, to be sure, perhaps it was from Jessica! He remembered now he had told her to look to him at any time of the day or night if she needed him. Why, perhaps she was in trouble. He hastened to the door and opened it.

A chauffeur came out of the lobby and hurried to him.

"Mr. Morley?" he asked respectfully.

Val nodded. "You have a message for me?"

"Yes, sir," replied the chauffeur. "From Miss Pomeroy, sir."

A warm glow went through Val. She needed him, and she was sending for him. That was good.

She wants you to come right away, sir—my taxi is downstairs," added the chauffeur.

"Come in," said Val, and he preceded the man into his apartment, peeling off his dresing robe as he did so.

"What's the matter with Miss Pomeroy?" he asked.

The driver shook his head negatively. "Dunno, sir. I was cruisin' around without no fare in me cab when I passed through her street. She called to me from the window and I come up. Then she told me to come to you and ask you to come at once. That's all I know, sir. Said I was to say it was very important."

"All right—be right with you," snapped Val, going for his coat.

He slipped his automatic into his pocket for the second time that night.

"Might need it," he muttered. He decided not to wake Eddie. He was tired and had done his share for that night. Probably he would not be necessary, anyway. Women get funny notions in the middle of the night, you know, and probably Jessica didn't need him so badly as she thought she did. But he felt exhilarated just the same. He glowed all over with the thought, the feeling that she had instinctively turned to him when she needed assistance.

"Let's go!" he snapped to the chauffeur.

A shabby taxi was waiting outside and the driver jumped for the wheel.

"Never mind the speed laws, young man," directed Val. "Let 'er out."

"Yes, sir," replied the driver of the car, which with a coughing of her exhaust, shot into high at once.

Through the darkened streets they fled across town, leaving belated warfarers staring after them in aston-

ishment as they shot along. Corners meant no slackening of the speed, and within the car Val, for all his bulk, rattled around like a pebble.

"Give er the gas!" he shouted out to the driver. "Faster! Can't you go faster!"

The driver said nothing, but the maker of the car would have been glad to get his testimonial of the speed of which it was capable. It was not something for any automobile manufacturer to be ashamed of. Now that he had time to think of it, Val was beginning to be alarmed for the girl. Surely, it must be something of vast importance that would cause her to send for him so late at night.

She was in danger! Perhaps, even now, whatever it was that was menacing her had overtaken her. Perhaps by now she was lying white and still——"

"Speed 'er up!" he shouted to the driver, who grunted something unintelligible in reply. Val's strained, white face gazed at the backward flying, slumberous streets; his soul was leaping far ahead of the car, straining to get to the side of his well-beloved. The car swept around a corner into Jessica's street, and with a grind of brakes slowed up in front of the house.

"Here y'are, sir," said the driver.

Val banged the door open and leaped out.

"Wait here!" he directed and plunged for the dark vestibule.

He turned to the bells to find the name of Pomeroy. It was so dark he could not make it out, and he leaned forward further.

Suddenly a million constellations burst before his eyes. Flowers bloomed and birds sang—or perhaps

flowers sang and birds bloomed—it was all the same to Val. An inert mass of unthinking, unconscious flesh, he lay crumpled up, unconscious to a busy world, in the vestibule of the house of Jessica Pomeroy.

Above him a large figure, grinning malevolently in the gloom, reared itself.

XIV

GREEN EYES THAT HYPNOTIZE

The happiness was effaced from the features of Jessica Pomeroy as a ragged gray cloud wipes out the sun. Gone was her little moment of forgetfulness and returned the ever-present menace. The moments of conscious happiness in the ordinary life are woefully small and few, little glowing incandescent islands entirely surrounded by cares. They are to be seized and held close for their brief stay, because when once they go it is not within the power of man to recreate, to "recapture the first fine careless rapture" that was that instant.

Something of all this dragged its way through the consciousness of Jessica as the taxicab bore her speedily back to her little flat—the flat where Ignace Teck awaited her. Happiness, then, was something to be looked at but not to be seized. It is the soap bubble of life, the will-o'-the-wisp of every day. She remembered that in "Alice in Wonderland" Alice was told that they never have jam to-day; they always have it yesterday or to-morrow—never to-day. Happiness, she decided, was close kin to that jam. Strange, too, how her thoughts of happiness were linked up with the figure of a clean-cut young man by the name of Valentine Morley, a man she had spoken to so few times she scarcely knew the sound of his voice. If he could have known. . . .

Jessica re-read Teck's note as the taxicab shivered along the darkened streets.

Come to your rooms at once. Important! Don't waste a moment. Will explain when you arrive.

I. T.

This note had broken up her dinner party before it was half over; she had been snatching at her moment of happiness when she received it. The wording of the note had made it imperative that she leave at once; as to the news that awaited her, she had no inkling. She knew only that Teck considered it of supreme importance that she return at once, and, obeying the fear that was always within her where this man was concerned, she was doing so. Nobody knew the extent of the fear and loathing that the sight of this man Ignace Teck held for her. This was something she held locked in her breast, always remembering that this man had become a loathly object through his devotion to her. He had sacrificed himself for her, and she considered it but just that she should give herself to him. True, the right sort of man would have refused to hold her in the bonds of gratitude—but he was Ignace Teck, who was wrapt in no such considerations.

He rose when she entered her living room, and addressed her ungraciously.

"Well, you took your time about coming, I must say."

She regarded him calmly, as always.

"I came as rapidly as possible," she intoned. "What is it you wanted?"

He paused for a moment before speaking, and made as if to place the stumps that were his hands on her shoulders. She evaded him with a single motion, as

though unconscious of what he had wanted to do, but he looked at her significantly, and the angry red mounted into his well-fed countenance.

"You always avoid me, Jessica," he rasped. "Is it on account of my deformity? I know I am no pretty object, but if you will remember, I came by these——"

"I know—I know, Ignace," she broke in hastily. "What is it you wanted to see me about? Something that was so important——"

"That I had to break up a nice little tête-à-tête between you and that Morley idiot," he broke in, leering sarcastically. "It would have to be important, of course, to interrupt that. Your relations with this man——"

"My relations with this man are none of your business, Ignace Teck," she broke in, "and don't get the idea that you can order me around as though I belonged to you already. I don't—and I'm not so sure that I ever will . . ." she paused and looked at him without speaking with her lips, but her burning eyes spoke the balance of the sentence.

"What do you mean?" he thundered at her. "If Valentine Morley has induced you to——"

"I need nobody to induce me to do what my common sense and my regard for the decencies instructed me long ago should be done," she went on firmly, now that the matter had been begun.

"You promised to marry me——"

"I promised to marry you," she confirmed, interrupting him again, "but the promise is not binding if you are a murderer. Nobody can be held to such a promise and——"

"How dare you say such a thing to me?" he interposed quietly, his eyes narrowing and the scar across

his face becoming purple, a deep gash across the sallow skin of his evil lineaments. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"You know very well what I mean," she threw back at him, two spots of color flaring in her cheeks. "I mean that you murdered Matthew Masterson—I know it as though I had been present. It is exactly what you would do——"

"That's a lie!" he interposed in a staccato whisper.

"Do you mean to say that you didn't steal the books——"

"Oh, that!" he dismissed that with a wave of a formless wrist, and a flicker of feeling shaded its way across his expressionless, except for the scar, face. "That was important—I needed them. But as for the bookseller, I deny that I killed him."

"What is there in those books that makes them so important?" she asked, forcing herself to calmness. "I had them here for so long—you could have had them at any time for the asking; but no sooner do I dispose of them than——"

"You will know in good time what there is in the books. To tell you the truth," he whispered confidentially, "I am not exactly sure myself of what there is in them—except . . ." he trailed off into an expressive silence, and she watched his features unbelievingly, knowing that there was more he did not choose to divulge.

"If you think that there is a clue in them concerning the money that was left by my father," she put in finally, "perhaps it will be well to remind you that the money belongs to me, in any event. Why should you take it upon yourself——"

"Never mind that," he interrupted harshly. "It con-

cerns me, too. Do you think that after these years of waiting I am going to permit myself to be cast aside by you like a worn-out mare in a stable of blooded stock? Think it over carefully, Jessica—do you think I am the type of man who would permit it?"

She had no answer to this, but there was the pallor of weariness in her face as she sank down into a soft chair on the opposite side of the room from him.

"I have a way of getting what I go after," he said after a pause, "and nobody knows that better than you—so you might just as well be good."

"Just what do you mean?" she inquired, flaring at him angrily. "Am I something that a man can go after—something to be had simply because he has made up his mind that he wants her?"

"Come, come," he smiled, and his face was strangely whimsical when he smiled that way, in strange contrast to the sinister appearance of the man when his features were in repose. "Don't be theatrical about it—there is no need for that mask between us, my dear. You have promised to marry me—and when women promise to marry me—" he smiled again—"I always make them stick to their promise. I suppose I'm queer that way, but"——he shrugged his shoulders——"I can't help it. Life is very peculiar, and we must seize our moments of happiness on the fly!"

This was so close to her own thoughts that she could hardly help gasping. She had rather prided herself on that bit of philosophy, but if philosophy was so easy that others could—without effort—think the same things, why it was scarcely worth while. Somebody has said that a great philosopher is one who says the things you have always thought but have never formulated into so many words. If what he writes causes

you to nod your head and say, "Yes, that's just what I have always thought," he is a great philosopher. This is to be doubted.

"But this business that was so important that you had to call me back to-night——"

"It's just this," he leaned over to her and spoke in a sibilant whisper. "I have rather a straight tip that the police are very close to making an arrest in the Masterson case and that I had better leave now while the leaving is fairly good——"

"But I thought you just said you had nothing to do with the murder of that poor old——"

"I didn't," he answered, "but it might be a bit difficult to prove just at this time. Because I did get the books, you see. So I thought it might be wise for us to go at once——"

"Us?" she inquired, looking at him curiously. "I hardly see why you include me in this affair——"

"Because," he said slowly, with a slight significant lift of his bushy brows, "if I don't—the police will. They are sure to include you in this. They know of our relations with one another; if they don't, it won't be difficult for them to find out, anyway, and——"

"But this is monstrous!" she ejaculated. "To have you drag me into a mess of this nature, when——"

"I didn't, my dear," he interposed calmly, silencing her with a wave of his arm. "It is circumstances that seem to drag you into it, not I. You know, in view of the fact that you sold the books, it will be difficult to keep you out of it—innocent as you are—as we are, that is. But if we go away at once—to-night!" he staccatoed the last word at her in a way that made her shudder—"I have reason to believe we will not be suspected or molested."

"Where were you thinking of going?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged his shoulders and considered for a moment. "Down in Virginia, perhaps——" he suggested.

"Well, go ahead," she threw at him coldly, and her eyes seemed the only live thing in her pale face as she spoke.

"I'm going," he nodded slowly. "So are you."

He spoke as though this were an accepted fact; as though it required but for him to enunciate the words to assure her that she was indeed going. It was a matter-of-fact, simple and concise statement of the future.

"But not with you," she said. "Not to Virginia—I'll go where I please. And moreover, I want you to stay away from my property down there."

"Ah, yes—your property," he acquiesced. "My mortgage——"

"As you know, I have sent down the money to satisfy the mortgage. It is now my property completely, and I don't want you down there—is that plain?"

He nodded silently, and held his peace for a few moments.

"You don't want me down there," he repeated at last, as one who, repeating a lesson by rote, parrots the words almost without knowing what they signify. His shifty, small eyes contracted.

"No," she reiterated. "I want you to stay away from there."

"Yes, you would," he said. "You are afraid that if the money turns up down there——"

"Whether it turns up or not has nothing to do with you. It is mine and it's going to stay mine."

He had no answer for this for a few moments. When

he rose finally, it was as one who has made his decision; one who has planned his course.

"We are both going to Virginia—to-night," he said softly, walking to her in his soft, catfooted way, lithe as a mountain animal, evil eyed and treacherous.

She shrank back from his advance and would have screamed, but there was something in his greenish tinged eyes that held her, something horrible that clove her tongue to the roof of her mouth. Pale as death and rigid, she watched him come to her.

XV

EDDIE USES HIS BRAIN

Eddie Hughes stirred restlessly in his sleep and groaned once or twice, as a restless sleeper sometimes will. He opened his eyes and stared at the blackness of the room, listening with all his faculties, for some reason, straining his eardrums and his eyes to the fullest extent. He had a feeling that all was not well.

The house was silent as the grave; there was absolutely nothing stirring, but Eddie had an oppressed feeling—a feeling that something had gone on there while he was asleep. He had known such a feeling in the trenches—the sensation that something was due to happen, and generally it did happen, a midnight raid or a sudden air attack that was not written into the program. That was the sensation he had now, and he gave way to it by arising softly and opening his door quietly to peer out into the dim light of the hall at the end of which was the closed door of his master's bedroom.

A draft breezed along the hall and made him uncomfortable in his thin pajamas. A window was open!

He contracted his brows. Of course there were windows open in the apartment, but none that should cause this draft, no matter how windy it was outside. The inference was plain; somebody had opened a window that was not generally open, and his mind traveled

instantly back to the time when he had discovered the side window in the living room open—the time when Mr. Morley had been chloroformed.

Silently, noiselessly, Eddie crept along the hall, for some unknown reason hugging the wall. At the door of the living room he paused, merging himself with the shadows. For a full minute he listened, hearing nothing. If there had been any one there he would surely have heard something—the sound of breathing, a board creaking underfoot, the soft pad of feet across thick rugs. It is not possible to move about in a room without leaving some trace for the auditory senses, some trail of movement. Sounds are comparative things, and the creaking of a board, however slight, is as audible in the stillness of the night as a pistol shot in broad daylight, if one is listening.

Softly Eddie entered the living room. Against the lightened darkness of the window his eye caught the delicate tracery of the lace curtains, not hanging quietly, as was their wont, but blowing inward slightly. He advanced to the window and inspected it. It was open.

He glanced around at the living room, which he could see dimly, now that his eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. Nothing was disturbed, nothing had been moved. The room was as it always had been.

But not quite. There was a difference, nothing tangible, nothing that one could put his hand on, but there was a feeling of change in the air, a feeling that someone who did not belong had been there. Rooms are like persons; they have their moods, moods of happiness and of gloom, of rest and of restlessness; everyone who has a favorite room in his home knows this.

Something of the mood of resentment that was in the living room enveloped Eddie's senses, some emotion that a stranger, an intruder, had been there. Of course, there was the evidence of the open window, but he would have known, even without that.

He tiptoed out into the hall again and paused for a moment in front of his master's door, listening for the regular breathing that he usually could hear at this time of the night. He heard nothing at all. He had slept soundly all through the visit of the chauffeur who had come to bear his master away, and consequently knew nothing of it, so there was something alarming in the fact that, along with the open window in the living room, he could not hear his employer breathing.

He placed his hand on the knob and tried it; it opened quietly, and he pushed the door open suddenly, out of patience with all this early morning mystery and tired of the obvious necessity for quiet. With a swift movement he switched on the light. The bed had not been slept on.

He surveyed the room hastily. Nothing had been disturbed, as in the living room.

"M-mm!" he reflected. "Something phoney about this—window open, Mr. Morley gone. He didn't go through the window, I guess." He considered this for a brief space, looking around the room for something which he had missed. He stepped quickly into the living room and glanced around quickly in there. His brow contracted in further worry.

The books were gone again.

He could not suppress an amused smile at this. "Like a bloomin' game of 'button, button, who's got the button?' " he commented.

"That mysterious bird's been here again—and gone," he muttered to himself, and in the same breath cursed himself for his careless stupidity.

Of course he had come for the books—it was to be expected; it was positively stupid not to watch out for him. Yet it had not occurred to either of them, somehow. These were not things that happened in every day life, though they were common in books. One did not expect midnight visitors without hands, who came in when you weren't looking and went just as silently. And yet it had occurred. He had come in and taken the books. It was as easy as that.

That being the case, where was his employer. It was not like him to go out again, when once he had come home for the night. In fact, he had told Eddie that he intended to go to bed in a few minutes, after he had made a cursory examination of the books. And now he was gone, and an examination proved to Eddie that he had taken his light fall coat and a hat. Evidently he had gone of his own free will.

Also, evidently, he had gone before the books had been stolen, because there was no sign of any struggle, and Eddie did not consider it possible that anybody could come in and gather up those books and make his escape without Mr. Morley's being aware of it.

That led to another train of thought. Probably the intruder knew that he would not be home. That being the case, Eddie carried the idea a little further. Perhaps he had made sure that his employer would not be home by the simple expedient of calling him out on some cock and bull errand.

Where was he now? Perhaps he needed him.

"Might've knew what would happen, soon's he got mixed up with a woman," muttered Eddie. He had

disapproved of this from the beginning, simply because there had been a woman in it. Adventures centering about women never do go off according to schedule. There is always something uncomfortable in them. "Female women, blast 'em!" he muttered again, and continued pondering upon the present whereabouts of Valentine Morley.

Eddie knew that there was just one kind of a message that could call Valentine Morley out at any time during the night—a message from Jessica Pomeroy—a good looking girl with trouble and sudden death in her eyes, he reflected. He dressed and, slipping an automatic into his side pocket, went out to interview the night man concerning any visitors with a message that his master might have had after he, Eddie, had retired.

XVI

FACED BY DEATH

Never was fashionable St. Thomas's so crowded, so brilliant, so athrill with the thrill that comes only with a long expected wedding in high places. Every seat in the large church was filled and the crowd stood five deep behind the last expensive pew.

Nervous, but adorable in his shy nervousness, Valentine Morley waited at the altar, his best man a little to one side of him. His heart leaped within him, but there was a scared feeling also that he had never experienced in France.

There was a great burst of music and the thrill of young voices leaping upwards to the vaulted roof, as Jessica Pomeroy and her retinue appeared at the head of the aisle. Stately the music became, and slow, and the procession started down the aisle.

A burst of gladness, a desire to shout in his joy, coursed through Val as he watched the bewildering picture of the girl who was to be Mrs. Valentine Morley, a girl and yet a woman as she glided down the aisle in solemn time to the music. The procession halted at the altar, and a slight perspiration broke out over Val when it occurred to him that perhaps his best man had forgotten the ring.

"Steady, old boy," came the reassuring voice of the best man in his ear. "The filly'll wait; don't be afraid. No false starts, now."

He nodded slightly, strengthened by the well known voice. He heard little more that was understandable, though a great deal was said. At last he discovered that the minister was saying:

"Do you, Valentine, take this woman to be your lawful wife?"

"There was a hush in the great church as all eyes turned toward Valentine Morley. He tried to answer, but something stuck in his throat; suddenly his throat and mouth were drier than they had ever been.

"Say yes, you dumbbell!" grated the voice of his best man, softly. "This is no time to change your mind."

Val gulped again, a light perspiration bedewing his brow.

With an extreme effort he spoke.

"I do!" he rasped hoarsely.

"You do what?" inquired a voice in front of him, and he turned to discover the sinister figure of Ignace Teck. The dream vanished instantly.

There was a gasp of disappointment as he discovered that there was no wedding; that he was lying on a couch in a very uncomfortable position, staring up at the huge figure of the handless one.

"Go to hell!" he rasped at Teck, annoyed. The change was too great to accept all at once. He stared at Teck a little curiously, half expecting him to dissolve, to disappear like the figures of his dream. But Ignace Teck was doing no disappearing this day—this was his day to appear, not to disappear. He was an apparition, but flesh and blood apparition.

"Ah, your usual courteous self," came the suave voice of Teck.

Val tried to sit up, and found that it was difficult.

He needed no glance at his limbs to discover that he was bound hand and foot.

"Stay the way you are," suggested Teck. "You'll find it more comfortable lying down."

Val glanced at as much of the room as he could see. It was a well furnished bedroom, with a couch at the side on which he was lying. Through the open door he could see a living room which he recognized.

He was in Ignace Teck's apartment.

"To what am I indebted for the honor you pay me," he inquired of Teck carelessly.

Teck dismissed it with a wave of his stump. "It's nothing—a little game of my own, you know. No trouble to me, I assure you."

"H-m-m! I suppose not," said Val dryly. "I might have known you would figure somewhere in this, Iggy."

"My name is Ignace—preferably Mister Teck to you," put in Teck, with dignity.

"Ah yes, Iggy, you are perfectly right. But why be so formal among friends?" bantered Val. "And, by the way, these cords of yours are hurting my wrists, you know."

"Indeed?" put in Teck politely.

"And, although I can't feel it, I suspect I have a rather large bump on my head," continued Val.

"Indeed you have," Teck assured him. "And you can thank your stars that you still have your head, my lad. If I had followed my own inclinations in the matter . . ." he paused significantly, but there was no mistaking the meaning of his glance at Val.

"What pleasant ideas you have, Iggy," admired Val. "I must say that must have been a man's-sized bump on the bean you handed me, Iggy——"

"I?" expostulated the other. "How could I, with nothing but these—these——" he said no more, but exhibited his handless wrists. "You flatter me, my friend."

"I don't know how you did it—but I guess you have your methods," suggested Val. "Excellent and efficient ones, I imagine, too."

The other nodded, smiling a trifle. He was in great good humor with himself at the moment. Things were going right. His enemy had been delivered—with a bit of help on his own part—into his hands. He was in a position to draw his teeth—or render his information valueless. He could afford to be a trifle amused and self-satisfied.

"I am glad to hear that you recognize the efficiency of my methods. You realize, perhaps, that I get what I go after. In fact, I might say I never fail," he told Val, who watched him curiously. "I have never failed," he repeated impressively.

"So?" queried Val nonchalantly. "Ah, well, people die to-day who never died before."

The other smiled. "Don't delude yourself. If there's any dying to be done around here, my lad, it isn't going to be me." He paused and looked at him significantly, his meaning plain. There was something fearsome about this man, in spite of his assumed pleasant manner, his finely modulated tones. There was an underlying threat in every syllable, in every lithe move of his big body, in every glance of his greenish tinged eyes. On his lips a well-bred smile became a leer and a pleasant word veiled a curse. Val was supremely conscious of the fact that here was a man who would stop at nothing to attain his end, whatever that was. Here was a man to whom no villainy was too

great if thereby he might achieve that which he desired.

It roused a streak of unreasoning obstinacy in Val, an obstinacy that had often won over his better and more sensible instincts. He was rich; he was young; he was presentable; women liked him; headwaiters adored him; his own way had been accorded to him as a matter of course, and it rasped on him to find that here was another man who insisted on having his own way, and who usually had it. Well, they would see.

"Just what do you propose to do with me?" he asked. "What is it you wish from me, that you should go to all this trouble——"

"I'll tell you, my friend," put in Teck. "I want your word that you will withdraw from this—er—this affair—you know what I mean—and stay withdrawn. I want you to promise that you will not attempt to communicate with Miss Pomeroy in any way—that you will not continue your acquaintance with her; an acquaintance, by the way, which I warned you would turn out badly for you. You refused to heed the warning and——"

"And just look at me now," finished Val.

"I also want your word that you will make no mention of anything that has gone before in this affair to any one——"

"Not even the police?" mocked Val.

"Not even the police—though I don't believe you would do that, anyway, because the slightest mention of the matter would bring Miss Pomeroy into the limelight. In a word, I want your promise that you will step out of the lives of myself and Miss Pomeroy at once, and stay stepped out. Have I made myself clear?"

"You have," answered Val. "Why should I promise any such fool thing—and what means have you of forcing me to do it, in case I should refuse?"

"You can promise what I ask because it means that if you do life will be a great deal easier for Miss Pomeroy than it has been since you came into the picture. If you don't——"

"Are you threatening harm to Miss Pomeroy?" grated Val harshly. "By God, if harm comes to her in the slightest way through you I'll carve your liver out, do you hear me? I'll take you apart to see what makes you go! Don't think for a moment that because you have me trussed up here——"

"Words, my boy, words. Talk is very economical—doesn't cost much. You're not in a position to make any threats, because you're going to promise me that you're going to go out of Miss Pomeroy's life for good."

"And if I don't?"

The other looked at him calmly, dispassionately for a moment, seeming to weigh his words.

"If you don't," he said at length; "ah, yes, if you don't, to be sure. Well, if you don't, you'll have to be—er—removed, that's all. You won't be the first man whose mouth has been sealed by—er—an untimely demise. A pity, too," he said, shaking his head commiseratingly, "you're young, and a rather nice looking boy. Really, too nice to have people filing past you and saying sadly, 'Doesn't he look natural!' Now, you'd better be sensible and do what I ask, because I assure you that I'm not bluffing in the slightest——"

"Aw, go to hell!" interrupted Val, bad temperedly. "I want to get some sleep."

"You'll sleep when I get done with you—perhaps

more than you wish," said Teck. "I want to warn you, too, that you'd better not try to escape, because if you do you'll be killed instantly. O'Hara!" he called out into the next room.

"Here y'are, boss," came the answer promptly, and an unshaven, hulking tough came into the room. One of his eyes was wickedly beady and black. Probably the other one was, too, normally. At present it was puffed to unholy proportions, and blue. He had a face like a horse, with a large, coarse looking nose and lips and ears laid well back to his closely cropped head.

"Hello, Horseface," called Val, cheerily. "Did you attend my little party here earlier in the evening? From the appearance of yon weakly glowing orb, I have me suspicions."

"Yes, I wuz here—an' I'll be here when you're gone, kid," answered the one called Horseface.

"Maybe—maybe," said Val. "In the meantime——"

"In the meantime," said Teck, "I just called him in to show you that you're covered—that the slightest move to escape on your part means death. What are your orders, O'Hara, if this man tries to escape or to shout?"

"To pump hot lead inta him, that's all, boss," said Horseface with satisfaction. "An' I might add that it will give me pleasure to carry out them there orders, too——"

"All right," interrupted Teck, nodding to the door. The tough withdrew to the next room and took up his silent vigil again.

"Nice, pleasant little playmates you have, Iggy, old thing," commented Val. "Must be a great intellectual satisfaction——"

"Intellectual satisfaction will not mean much to you when you're saying 'Hello, St. Peter,' " said Teck, with meaning.

"I say," said Val, "I'm awfully thirsty—can I have a drink of water?" As a matter of fact his tongue and mouth were parched with thirst. He had been a trifle feverish after the blow on the head which he had received, and his throat felt dry as dust. He felt the need of water more than he had ever felt it before.

"Ah, water, to be sure. I'm thirsty myself," nodded Teck mildly. "O'Hara, bring in a glass of water, will you."

O'Hara grunted, and in a moment Val heard the sound of running water in the kitchen. In a few moments the horsefaced one brought in an overflowing glass.

"Thanks," said Teck. He took the glass between his two maimed wrists and held it before him reflectively. "Surprising how badly one wants water when he wants it," he commented, "isn't it? Now, take you, for instance, Mr. Morley. You'd probably appreciate this humble glass of water, if I should give it to you, wouldn't you? You'd——"

"Don't you intend to give it to me?" asked Val.

The other shook his head, mildly surprised. "Give it to you? Why, I'm thirsty myself." He drained the glass at a gulp and set it on the table. "Ah, that was good," he wiped his lips. "There's nothing so good as water when you're thirsty. Think it over, Mr. Morley—you may be thirstier before you get it." He rose.

"You dirty hound," said Val, exasperated. "Do you mean to torture me——"

The other looked at him, pained. "Torture you?

How can you say so, my dear fellow? I, the kindest hearted of men! Really, you know, it hurts me to have you say such things of me. All you have to do is to promise what I ask—then I'll give you all the water you want, and your freedom. It isn't much to ask."

"I'll see you in hell first, you snake," said Val, pleasantly, smiling though his throat felt the need of water now more than before, having seen the relish with which Teck drank his glass. "Did you think it would be as easy as that?"

The other shook his head. "No, I was afraid it would not be as easy as that. However, you may come to your senses yet. In the meantime, I feel the need of a couple of hours sleep myself—it's almost daylight. When I wake you can tell me your decision."

"I'm telling it to you now, Iggy," replied Val. "Nothing doing."

Teck shook his head again, but said nothing. He threw himself down on the bed and went to sleep immediately.

In a few moments Val was asleep, too.

XVII

A DESERTED APARTMENT

Eddie Hughes' interview with the night man confirmed his suspicions. A taxi chauffeur had called with a personal message for Mr. Morley—a message which he was at pains to deliver personally. And Mr. Morley had gone away with him in the taxicab with no loss of time.

Eddie nodded his head in confirmation of what he had been thinking. There was just one thing that would call Valentine Morley out at that time of the night—a message from Miss Pomeroy. She was in trouble, and Mr. Morley had gone to her assistance. Or—and this came to Eddie like a sudden shaft of light—suppose Mr. Morley had been *told* that Miss Pomeroy needed him. Suppose that somebody wanted Mr. Morley out of the way—and conceived this means of removing him.

Having removed him thus, what had they done with him then? That was something for Eddie to find out, supposing his assumption was correct and his employer was not on some legitimate business that was none of his, Eddie's, affair. But Eddie rather thought that if Mr. Morley was able to come home, he would already have done so. Not having done so was an indication to him either that his employer could not, physically, come home, or that the business upon which he was engaged was of such magnitude that it necessitated his

staying out until morning—in which event Eddie imagined that perhaps he could be of service to his employer.

Eddie was helped in these suppositions by the fact that Valentine Morley led a regular, decent life. He was not a midnight rounder, despite his wealth and the temptations to so become; he loved his home and his own fireside and his books—and if he was to stay out later than in any way usual, he would be sure to inform Eddie of that fact. It was now nearly morning, and he was not home. That meant that Eddie had better begin to look him up.

Eddie went around the corner to the house garage and got out the low, speedy roadster.

"Goin' outta see how the night's holdin' up, me bucko?" inquired the night watchman at the garage.

"Naw," said Eddie. "I'm going out to the park to do Greek dances in the dewy grass, get me? Barefoot stuff, an' flowin' robes, far from the maddin' throng. Us esthetic guys get that way sometimes, see!"

With a look of disgust the watchman settled back in his seat. "Which the same ain't sayin' that you nor that fool millionaire boss a' yourn ain't capable av doin' such," he offered.

"Cheerio!" remarked Eddie with a wave of his hand. He had learned the word in France, having heard British officers use it occasionally, and he lost no opportunity of getting it off.

"Now, don't git them little feetsies av yourn damp, love," called out the watchman after Eddie as the car slid out of the garage. The roadster swept around the corner with a roar and was lost in the darkness in a moment.

If a message from Miss Pomeroy had called his em-

ployer out, that, then, was the place to start looking for him. It occurred to Eddie that he might be butting into something where he would not be very welcome, but he cast off the thought with a shrug of his broad shoulders. Perhaps. On the other hand, perhaps Mr. Morley needed him.

And if Mr. Morley needed him, hell was not too hot for him to cross, nor the ocean too damp. He would carry on, on the chance of his being useful.

Running his engine as quietly as possible, he drew up at the door of the flat house where Jessica Pomeroy lived. He sat in his seat, before the darkened, silent house, for a few minutes, deliberating on what his next move should be. Of course, the straightforward move, and the obvious one, was simply to ring Miss Pomeroy's bell and go on up. It was as simple as that.

But actually it was not as easy as all that. One hesitated to ring the bell of a stranger at this time of the night; that is, unless one were very sure of his ground. And Eddie was not any too sure of what he was doing. After all, was it his business? It was not, he decided.

Then why shouldn't he turn the car in the direction of home, go there, and finish his sleep? No doubt, by morning, Mr. Morley would return, and no one would be any the wiser for this little nocturnal trip. And there is little doubt that that is just what Eddie would have done, had it been simply a case of Valentine Morley not coming home. But his being out at this time of the night, coupled with the fact of the theft of the books (again); these two things together gave the matter an ugly look. Eddie could not cast out of his

mind the thought that his master had been lured out of the house. That being so, he might need him rather badly.

With a muttered curse on all men who were thick headed enough to get mixed up with female women, Eddie climbed out of the car and entered the vestibule.

He rang the Pomeroy bell and waited for the answering tick. There was none, though he gave the occupants of the Pomeroy flat plenty of time to get out of bed and open the door. He rang again, loudly and insistently this time, but still he got no answer. He rang again, and shook impatiently at the door. It opened, though there was no tick of the electric push button. Like many flat house doors, it was open more often than it was shut.

He peered into the silent gloom of the hall, but could see nothing. On a last chance he rang the bell again, keeping the door open with his foot. There was no answer, and on a sudden determination he entered the dark hall and made his way upstairs to the Pomeroy flat.

Here he rang the bell loudly and heard it reverberating inside, but there was no answer and he became convinced that nobody was home. He tried the door, and to his surprise it opened. The lock was not of the spring type, and evidently whoever had charge of such matters had forgotten to turn the key.

"H-m-m, must've been in an awful rush to get out," muttered Eddie, straining his eyes to see into the apartment. He could see nothing, and resolving to press his luck he entered. He struck a match and lighted the gas in the hall, and from there went into the living room, where he also struck a light.

The place was deserted. He did not need an inspection of the rooms to convince him that there was nobody in the house.

"Nobody alive, that is," he commented to himself.

In one of the bedrooms he found the door of the closet open, and the scattered condition of the clothes, both in the closet and around the room persuaded him that the occupant or occupants had left in a hurry. The dresser top was swept bare of toilet articles, and lying on the floor was a timetable.

They had left in a hurry, certainly. So far, so good; but where did his employer come in here. Had he left with them? And if so, where had they gone?

The timetable gave him a slight hint. It was a railroad having its terminus in Norfolk, Virginia. He knew that in Virginia the Pomeroys had an estate, somewhere outside of Hampton, which is very near Norfolk. Had they gone down there?

Probably. But would Mr. Morley have gone down there with them so suddenly without leaving with him some word of his travels? He had to admit that, based on past performances, that was unlikely. At any rate, he had never done anything of that nature before.

This led to another train of thought. Was Valentine Morley with Miss Pomeroy? He had decided that his employer had been lured out of his house—certainly it wasn't Miss Pomeroy who had done the luring. No, it was quite likely that Miss Pomeroy had departed without his master, for the simple reason that his master was somewhere else at the time.

But where? Eddie's brow furrowed in thought. Who would find it necessary or expedient to lure Mr. Morley out of his house? Why, the man who wanted to steal the books. Who was that? Eddie's brow

cleared. That was simple; why, the bird without no hands, to be sure. How dumb he had been not to think of that!

Well, he knew where *he* lived, at all events. A visit down there might do no harm, though one had better be careful how he prowled around in that neighborhood. Though, come to think of it, that was rather a glorious fight they had had there earlier in the evening. Eddie's eyes brightened. There was much in this affair he could not understand, but a fight was a fight in any language, and there were few people who enjoyed one better than he. Now, if a man was looking for a fight, where was a better place to go than to the house of Ignace Teck?

Closing the door behind him, Eddie made his way softly downstairs and entered his car. As silently as his engine would permit, he swung out into the center of the roadway and hit the dust for the corner. At the corner he swung the nose of his car downtown, in the direction of the residence of Ignace Teck.

Dawn was beginning to break over the sleeping city as Eddie Hughes sped downtown in his employer's roadster. In black, bold relief, like the background of an etching, the houses to the east stood out against the slowly rising light. Suddenly the street lamps went out, leaving the city in a tenebrous, gray light that peopled the disappearing shadows with velvet darkness.

The city began to awake. There was the clank of the milkman's bottles, and the clang of the street cleaner's cart. To the east the roar of the elevated railway punctuated hoarsely the sleep of those within range. Newsdealers appeared on the street corners with the morning edition of some papers and the after-

noon and evening editions of certain other sensational papers which shall here be nameless.

At Spring Street Eddie turned east to the elevated railway. He did not think it wise to pay his intended visit to Teck in this expensive car. It was not the kind of a neighborhood for that sort of thing, and besides, he did not wish to advertise his interest in the matter. If his employer was anywhere around Teck's rooms, it would be because he couldn't get away; certainly, then, secrecy was a necessity. The way to serve secrecy would be to come on foot, silently, and unobtrusively.

Under the elevated railway Eddie hunted up an all night garage where he was familiar with the proprietor. He stored his car there, saying that he would be back soon. Then, slipping his hand into his pocket to see that he still had his automatic, he turned his face in the direction of the house of Ignace Teck.

XVIII

FATAL ORDERS

Val was awakened by the clatter of plates and eating utensils. The smell of crisp bacon and fried eggs came pleasantly to his nostrils. It was broad daylight, and the sun was streaming into the dingy apartment through the window opposite the couch on which Val lay.

At the table sat Ignace Teck, making a hearty and evidently enjoyable meal, managing his utensils with an awkward cleverness that bespoke many years of doing the same thing. He did it surprisingly well, and Val could see that he ate with almost as little trouble as a man in possession of all his limbs. He held his fork pressed between his two wrists, and was remarkably limber and clever at it.

Val wondered how he went about dressing. One could hold a fork or a knife between his wrists, but how did one button a shirt? That was something that needed fingers and thumbs. How did one put in a collar button—sometimes hard enough for normal persons, even? Val decided that he probably had assistance.

He also decided that, in addition to being abominably thirsty, he was hungry; he knew there was little chance of getting food here. Yet the fine tang of the sizzling bacon was tantalizing to a man who was bound hand

and foot and knew he would probably get no breakfast of any kind.

"I say, you do that rather well, you know," said Val.

The other turned and regarded him pleasantly.

"Oh, you're awake, are you?" he asked unnecessarily, and smiled. "Isn't it funny the useless questions people ask? Now, I can see darn well you're awake—and yet I ask. I guess it's just to be polite."

"Be polite, to be sure," agreed Val. "Let nothing interfere with your good manners. Even when you're committing a murder—just a slight murder, you know, nothing much—do it in a genteel way; be cultured above all things. Remember Gilbert's little poem:

> When the enterprising burglar isn't burgling,
> When the cut-throat isn't occupied in crime,
> He loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling,
> And listen to the merry village chime.
> When the coster's finished jumping on his mother,
> He loves to lie a-basking in the sun;
> Ah, take one consideration with another,
> The policeman's lot is not a happy one!"

Teck laughed, and went on eating, not able to reply because his mouth was rather full of toast and bacon and egg.

"Though I suppose it's rather bad form to mention a policeman to you, isn't it?" he suggested pleasantly. "In the house of the hangman, you know——"

"That's all right, I don't mind, my friend," assured Teck. "Have your little minute, if you wish—it won't be long."

"Well, that's about all any of us have on this old earth, isn't it?" queried Val. "A little minute—and darkness——"

"Darkness comes to some quicker than to others,"

put in Teck. "Especially to the obstinate." He took another mouthful.

"Smells good," suggested Val, hopefully.

"It is good," Teck assured him. "There are very few better cooks than O'Hara, when he isn't——"

"When he isn't engaged in the delightful pastime of assassination, I suppose. I say, is he a union murderer, or does he have to put in more than eight hours a day at manslaughter? This is not mere curiosity, you know; I ask because I am interested in the betterment of conditions for the working classes. Does he have to specialize, or is he permitted to vary his duties by a little burglary here and there, or an occasional bit of assault and battery? You know for yourself how boring and monotonous it is, committing nothing but murder all the time, with never a chance——"

"Hope you're enjoying yourself, Mr. Morley," put in Teck tersely. "It's your last chance, you know. Still thirsty?"

"Why? Aren't thinking of giving me food and drink, are you?" Val asked.

The other shook his head. "No," he said regretfully, "it would not be in strict accord with the most elementary principles of economics. Suppose you promise what I ask—what happens? Why, you go free, and in five minutes are buying your own food at a restaurant. Suppose you don't—what happens?" he asked this judicially. "Why, in a short time you won't feel the need of food—it'll be all the same whether you were hungry or whether you were sated—see! That being the case, why should I waste my substance on you? Do you find any flaw in my reasoning? Speak up if you do—I'm rather proud of that sequence of thought."

"Seems to be O. K.," admitted Val, "always supposing, of course, that your suppositions come through as scheduled. Now suppose, for instance, that I not only refuse to promise what you wish me to promise, but I also escape. Suppose——"

"Nonsense," Teck shook his head. "You cannot escape. O'Hara is in the next room, and the house is surrounded by—by my friends. You are bound. The slightest noise means that you will be gagged—if necessary, knocked on the head. It hurts me to have to tell you these things, my friend, because I am naturally of a kindly disposition, and I wouldn't wish to cause pain to the slightest of His creatures, but—of course," he said with a sigh, "if you make it necessary, why, one must do one's duty, distasteful as it is."

"Sounds all right," said Val. "But this is a civilized city—New York, you know; one doesn't commit a murder and get away with it like that. My—er—body, for instance——"

"Oh, don't give yourself the slightest concern about that," Teck waved the suggestion aside airily. "Don't worry about it, I beg of you. As for the proper disposition of—er—remains, why, we have our own system, and a very efficient one it is, too, let me tell you. No, you needn't worry about that."

"That's all right, then," said Val. "Relieves my mind a great deal, you know. One naturally would be concerned about these things, that is, even if one is convinced that you're a damned bluffer, to say nothing of being a liar who would never have the nerve to carry out the plan you have indicated."

The other looked at him, pained. "My dear boy, I'm sorry you feel it necessary to use such strong language

to me. I haven't asked much of you—just a promise to withdraw from this affair entirely—an affair that really does not concern you, anyway; surely you can see that in this thing you're nothing but an outsider, who has butted into things that are none of his business. Just promise me to keep away from Miss Pomeroy for good, and to——"

"Iggy," said Val, "will you be good enough to go to hell?"

"Ah, still unregenerate, I see," Teck shrugged his shoulders. "Some people never learn. You know, I've been uncommonly gentle up to now. I could easily have spared myself a lot of trouble by—er—disposing of you at once, as some of my associates suggested at the time. You would never have known what hit you, and there wouldn't have been all this waste of time and talk—though if it amuses you, I'm satisfied."

"M-m-m, I suppose I ought to be thankful to you for that," said Val. "I guess it wasn't very convenient for you to put me out of the way at the time, or you would have done it."

"Well, never mind that," put in Teck. "We're wasting a lot of time and——"

"At present," said Val, "time is——"

"A lot of time, and there are many things I have to do before I leave this evening," went on Teck placidly.

"Leave this evening—where are you going?" asked Val curiously.

The other looked at him. "Of course, strictly speaking, it is scarcely any of your business," he said. "My movements do not concern you in any way—but considering the fact that by this evening you will be defi-

nitely removed from this matter one way or another, I don't mind telling you that I am going to join Miss Pomeroy."

"Join Miss Pomeroy?" queried Val. "Why, isn't Miss Pomeroy in the city at present——"

"That's as may be," said Teck. "At any rate, I'm going to join Miss Pomeroy, who, I may say, is awaiting me impatiently. I don't suppose it will interest you to know that we intend to marry this week—perhaps tomorrow, if possible——"

"Iggy, why try those clumsy lies on me?" protested Val. "It happens that I saw Miss Pomeroy last night, as undoubtedly you are aware, and she said nothing that would lead me to believe——"

"There's nothing surprising about that, my good man," said Teck patiently. "You see, she didn't know it herself at the time. In fact, she doesn't know it yet; but it's going to happen just the same."

"Marry you!" ejaculated Val, looking at him interestedly.

"Yes, me!" said Teck heatedly, his greenish eyes showing the first trace of anger they had shown during the conversation. "Why not?"

"Well, if you don't know why not, Iggy, I guess there's no use arguing with you. All I have to say is that you'll marry Miss Pomeroy about the same time the Kaiser takes Chicago—or perhaps a trifle later than that."

"That remains to be seen," retorted Teck, angrily. "Not that you'll be here to see it, either."

"There's one thing that puzzles me, Iggy," said Val. "It's about those books. What is there about them that makes it so important for you to get possession——"

"That's none of your business," snapped Teck, ugly and out of temper suddenly. "What I want to know is whether you will do as I ask—promise me that you will——"

"I will not," said Val. "Get that idea out of your head. Under no circumstances will I make any such promises."

"Do you understand that I actually mean to do what I said? That I will——"

"I suppose so," said Val. "I think you're capable of anything, even that. Why are you so anxious to get rid of me, though? So anxious that you'll even commit murder——"

"Why, you're in my way, that's all. Even you ought to be able to see that, it's so plain. But I'm not going to argue with you any more. I have a great deal to attend to, and I'd better start on it. I'll be back about noon—you'd better think things over pretty carefully until then, and give me the answer I want."

"If I'm here by then," put in Val.

"You'll be here. Oh, Rat!" he called. A giant of a man showed himself at the door and glared malevolently at Val. "All right," directed Teck. The guard withdrew. "I just wanted you to know that there is somebody here looking out for you, while O'Hara sleeps. He has orders to prevent your escape at any cost. So don't try anything queer—take my advice. He's short tempered, and an occasional bumping-off means nothing in his young life. In fact, between him and O'Hara, I imagine they'd be rather glad of a chance to do you in, to pay you for that rumpus last night. Take it easy while I'm gone, and think it over pretty carefully."

XIX

VAL WAXES OBSTINATE

There was little else Val could do, besides "think it over pretty carefully" while Ignace Teck was gone. He could see all of the room from the couch on which he lay, and he inspected it carefully. It was an ordinary bedroom. At one end of the room, at a blank wall, was a walnut bed. On the other blank wall, opposite the only window, was the couch. At the south end was the door leading into the living room, where he could hear the guard addressed as Rat stirring occasionally. Near that end of the room was a small table.

There was no entrance to the room but the door, and Rat was outside that, though Val was grateful that he did not choose to sit in the same room with him. He reflected that probably the other cared as little for his company as he cared for that of the Rat. The window was just an ordinary window, with no fire-escape outside it. It provided no mode of ready entrance or egress that Val could see. The window was closed its full length, though not locked, as Val could see from where he lay. There was no reason for locking it, evidently.

Next Val gave his attention to the cord that bound him. He found little here that was of any comfort to him. He was bound tightly, and it took very little time

for him to discover that he would not be able to undo his bonds. The cords were on for keeps, and Val imagined that they would stay on until somebody took them off. He was helpless on the couch, with his hands bound behind his back and his feet closely tied. There was no hope there.

As time dragged on he grew thirstier and thirstier. His tongue and throat began to feel furry, and though he would have enjoyed breakfast, yet would he have appreciated a drink still more. Perhaps the guard in the next room—

"Hey, Rat," he called.

The big form of the tough bulked in the doorway.

"Whatcher want?" he growled at Val.

"I'm awfully thirsty—would you be good enough to get me a glass of water?" Perhaps the guard had not been told that he was to receive no sustenance of any sort.

"Better make it champagne, young fellow," suggested Rat with heavy sarcasm. "You got just as much chanct of gettin' dat, see!" He spread his right hand flat, indicating that the interview, insofar as he was concerned, was finished.

"It might be worth your while, Rat," insinuated Val. "I'm not mentioning any names, but if anybody around here gives me a helping hand so that I can get out, why, that man won't have to do any work for the rest of the year." He looked at Rat significantly.

It did not work. The other shook his head vigorously.

"I don't never work, anyway," he growled. "An' don't run away wit' no idea that anybody around here'll give you a lift. Me, I'd like to bump you off, myself, after that there bash on th' dome you gimme

last night. If I had my way, I'd knock yer fer a row a' red, white an' blue barber poles, git me?"

Val nodded. "I think I perceive what you're trying to tell me, rat face," said Val. "You mean that you won't give me a drink of water, don't you?"

"Dead right, kid," exclaimed the guard. "An' don't try that bribe stuff on me or anyone around here agen. I might git insulted an' pop yer one on th' bean, see!"

"Is it possible?" retorted Val.

"Don't git sarcastical, young feller," said Rat. "You'll soon find out if it's possible to insult me, if yer keep it up. I'm goin' out, now an' I don't want to be bothered. If I have to come in agen to yer, I'll put yer where ya kin hear the boidies sing."

With dignity he withdrew.

Val had to smile, in spite of his disappointment. That little sally of his last night had really done him a great deal of harm, he reflected. It had earned him the enmity of his guards, who, under ordinary circumstances, might have been amenable to a bribe.

As for Teck, he was not afraid of him, nor of his threats, for the simple reason that he did not think that even he would dare to carry them into execution. It is one thing to threaten to kill a man, and it is still another to proceed to carry out said threat in cold blood. Not that he did not think Teck capable of murder; far from that. But he did think that the project was too dangerous, even for Teck. For that reason he resolved to stick it out. Teck would bring pressure to bear—he was sure of that—but he was also sure that Teck would stop at murder.

It was easy to see why Teck wanted him out of the way. In the first place, he was a disturbing element in an affair that was going the way Teck wanted it to go,

until he entered. With Val in the ring, Miss Pomeroy was able to put up a stiffer resistance to the importunities of the handless one. It was plain that she did not wish to marry Teck; it was also plain that she was afraid of him. It was fear, in addition to her feeling of gratitude to the man, that had led her to promise that she would marry him, Val decided.

And then there was the money. Evidently Teck had a shrewd idea as to its approximate whereabouts. Alone he would be able to hunt for it at his leisure; finding it, he would be in a masterful position as regards Miss Pomeroy. He could see already that the lady was taking far more interest in Val than the occasion—to him—seemed to warrant. Val was a dangerous rival and must be put out of the running. Hence his present position.

But Valentine Morley had no intention of being put out of the running. He intended to force the pace, and once free from his present predicament—and he did not doubt that he would get free, of course—he intended to put Teck in his proper place. He might not have been in a position to take any such action previously, but now that the mask had been flung away and Teck had come out openly as being desirous of his extinction, Val considered he had authority to take action in his own right; this he intended to do.

In the meantime, his greatest need was to get out of this room; to get away from the power of this man. Val was free to admit to himself that at the moment he did not see how this was to be accomplished. Alone he seemed to be powerless to do anything.

Now, if only Eddie Hughes had any idea of his whereabouts . . . if, say, Eddie became alarmed about his absence, there would be a chance. Eddie was a very

canny citizen; one who could put two and two together and get the correct answer in addition most of the time. If it occurred to Eddie that there was anything strange in his employer's absence—and such a thought was bound to occur to Eddie, because Valentine Morley was not in the habit of staying out in this manner—why, then there might be something doing, Val thought.

And then there was Jessica Pomeroy! Where was she? He had gathered from Teck's conversation that she had gone away somewhere. As he had seen her last night, he was rather under the impression that if she had indeed gone away in such haste, she had not done so of her own volition. That she knew anything of his present plight he indignantly rejected. Of course, the message he had received had purported to come from her, but he knew she was ignorant of the entire matter. He knew now that it was nothing but a ruse on the part of Teck—a simple ruse which he should have watched for, he told himself—it was so obvious.

And indeed, had anybody but Jessica Pomeroy been involved, he would have been on his guard, because Valentine Morley was not the guileless young man that this chronicle has perhaps led observers to believe. But where Jessica Pomeroy was concerned all ordinary rules went by the board. Val simply lost his head when he thought about her—and there had, to him, been nothing strange in the fact that she should send for him in the middle of the night. Why not? He had told her to send for him if she needed him—and if she needed him in the middle of the night why, that was the time to send for him. It was all simple enough.

But where would she go in such haste? That was the point to be decided, because by now he was firmly of the opinion that she needed him to protect her. If

she had not gone of her own volition, but had been forced, she surely needed him. Anyway, he was going to decide where she had gone, and he would follow on the chance that she would be glad to see him. It was worth while for him to try, because there was the chance of his being near her. That would be enough for him—just to be somewhere where Jessica Pomeroy was; where he could see her and drink in the wine of her presence. That last phrase was his, and he was a little proud of it. The wine of her presence! Truly, it ran trippingly off the tongue.

It was about noon when Val reached these conclusions, and true to his promise Teck returned. He was not in good humor—Val could see that. Val improved the shining moment.

"How about a drink, Iggy?" he asked innocuously.

"Have you decided to promise what I asked of you?" inquired Teck in his turn. Val shook his head.

"Then don't worry about a drink, because you'll need one still worse where you're going from here," Teck promised him blackly.

"The latest authorities agree that there is no hell, except as one makes it for oneself on this earth," said Val. "I am a little surprised to see that you still believe in that obsolete place. It was a fiction invented for those——"

"Well, unless you do what I ask you're going to find out pretty soon whether or not there is a hell," answered Teck. "I'm not inclined to stand any more nonsense from you." He sat down at the table and regarded his prisoner bleakly.

"Got a smoke?" asked Val.

The other nodded. "But not for you, my friend," he said. He pressed his wrist to his vest pocket and a

thin silver cigarette case leaped out. He opened it dexterously by pushing the catch, holding the case between his two wrists as he did so. It was one of the kind of cases that hold the cigarettes upright in the middle. All he had to do now was to bend his head and grasp one of the white paper rolls between his lips. Next he pressed the opposite vest pocket and a thin lighter leaped out.

The cap opened as Teck pressed the button on the side, shooting a thin blade of flame toward him. He lighted his cigarette and closed the lighter. For a moment he said nothing, inhaling the smoke luxuriously.

"Very clever," commented Val.

"You learn to do things for yourself after awhile," remarked Teck. "Now, about this promise——"

"How do you know that I'll keep my promise, anyway?"

"Oh, you will. I know your kind," Teck assured him.

"I know, Iggy, but a promise obtained under duress is not valid, anyway," Val protested.

"I'll take my chance on that," said Teck. He knew he was safe in that regard; Val was one of the class to whom a promise is a sacred thing, and Teck knew it. He was taking no chances, really, he considered.

"I want a definite answer from you, Morley," announced Teck. "I'm leaving town this evening, and before I go you will have promised what I asked you, or you will no longer be in a position to promise anything. And don't console yourself with the idea that I'm bluffing—because if you call my bluff you won't be here to find out whether you were right or wrong. You know what I'm referring to," he said meaningly.

"Don't you know it's bad form to end a sentence

with a preposition, Iggy. Where were you brung up, anyway?" Val inquired lightly.

"Never mind my grammar," growled Teck. "I'd sooner make grammatical mistakes and be alive than be perfect—and dead."

"What pleasant ideas you have," remarked Val.

"I'm going out and I won't return until this evening. I'll look in then just to see whether you are ready to come across—and if you're not, why, I'll continue on my way—after handing you over to the tender mercies of Rat and O'Hara. And they're not squeamish, either, I can assure you of that. And another thing——"

"Good by, Iggy," Val interrupted him, wriggling so that he was turned to the wall.

The other regarded him evilly for a moment, turned on his heel and went out.

XX

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GRAVE

All that long afternoon, between longing for a drink and frowning upon the clamor of his stomach, Val pondered the matter at issue. Would Teck actually carry out his threats? Was he bluffing? What would he really do when he became convinced that Val would not make the desired promises?

Everything hinged on that. If Teck was bluffing—and Val was a little inclined to the belief that he was, it would be humiliating to Val not to call that bluff. If, on the other hand, he was in deadly earnest, Val stood to lose his life for a theory—the theory that Jessica Pomeroy wanted him to assist her—the theory that, perhaps, he would personally prove interesting enough to her to cause her to feel toward him the affection he already felt toward her. In other words, it was theoretically possible, Val thought, that he could teach her to love him.

If he was wrong it was not of consequence at this moment, anyway, because life without her—he already knew—would not be worth the effort; it would simply be a waste of good years, empty and tasteless. If he promised what Ignace Teck wished him to promise, he would have to step out of her life for good; he would be bound, in honor, not to approach her again.

But would he really be bound? Val turned this over in his mind for a long time. Is a man bound by a

promise obtained under threat of losing his life? Val did not think so—and yet, to him a promise was a sacred thing, something to be upheld at all costs, whatever the circumstances surrounding the giving of it. He could not lightly make up his mind to violate his word, though he knew Teck was a scoundrel who meant no good to Jessica, a man towards whom it was not necessary to be honorable.

Was there such a thing as being comparatively honorable? Were there shades of honor? Val had never thought so before. Either a thing was honorable—either it was the sort of thing a gentleman could do—or it was not. That was all there was to it. But now he was face to face with another phase of honor; he discovered that, perhaps, there might be extenuating circumstances to accompany the breaking of a man's word.

It took a long time to get Val to this frame of mind, but he finally decided to stick it out as long as possible, and then, when he actually perceived that Teck or his associates really meant to put an end to his existence, to give in. He considered that such a promise was not binding; a promise of that sort made to a murderer and a scoundrel for the furtherance of his own nefarious plans, under threat of murder, was not the kind that a gentleman could be expected to keep. But he meant to wait until the last possible minute.

Night was falling when Teck returned. With him came O'Hara, the horsefaced one. He bustled into the room, indicating that he had not a moment to waste. A glance at the couch sufficed to show him that Val was still there, and that he was awake.

"Light up, O'Hara," directed Teck, and in obedience the man addressed lighted one of the gas jets.

"All right; wait in the next room with Rat until I need you," Teck told him, and with a look of malevolent hatred at the recumbent figure of Val, O'Hara withdrew to the next room, where he could be heard in low voice converse with Rat.

Teck turned his attention to Val.

"Let's end this for good," he said. "I'm leaving town to-night, and there are things I have to do before making my train, so I have only a few minutes to stay with you—much as I enjoy your company," he said with heavy sarcasm.

"Oh, Iggy, don't go," implored Val. "Stay and play with me for a little while. Tuck me in before you go, anyway."

Teck frowned. Evidently this man before him did not realize the seriousness of his position; he could not realize that he stood on the brink of the grave—an unknown grave.

"Listen," he said angrily. "I've had enough of this damned foolishness. Never mind the compliments—let's get down to business."

"Let's," answered Val, a trifle wearily. He felt the need of food and he would have given much for a few drops of water. He stored it all up in his mind for future reference; some day he would make this man pay for his discomfort.

"I want to ask you, once and for all, whether you will do as I ask. No—don't answer yet—wait till you hear what I have to say before you answer, because it's going to be the last time. If your answer is no, I intend to leave at once—I am in a hurry. You will be left in the hands of O'Hara and Rat, both of whom would just as soon kill you as look at you—sooner, perhaps. They are to give you an hour of grace; if

during that hour you make the promises I wish from you, they will free you; if not, you will be—er—put away permanently at the end of the hour. I will be gone, so there will be no alternative. Either you say yes or you die.

"Your stand in the matter is a very foolish one. You can have no real personal interest in these things; I understand you never saw Miss Pomeroy until a very few days ago; you have only spoken twice to her. You are interfering in matters that really don't concern you at all—and a continuance of such interference will cost you your life; in fact, a statement that you intend to continue your interference will cost you your life. I have plans of very great importance, things that mean more to me than you can imagine, and I will take no chances of any upset occurring through the interference of a romantic young fool like you—that is my reason for being so insistent. You have already seriously interfered with me several times, and I'll take no further chances for the reason that the next time you butt in it might be fatal to my own plans. Now, think carefully before you answer, because I can hardly impress upon you too strongly that I am in deadly earnest—I mean every word I say. You are a young man, you have millions, you have everything to live for; take my advice, then, promise what I want, and go home and forget all about the matter."

"Pretty speech, Iggy. Do it some more," commented Val softly.

"Don't get funny," flashed Teck angrily back at him. "You'll find out in a few minutes that there is nothing funny about it."

"I've told you my answer before this, Teck," replied

Val. "I haven't changed my mind. Your mother must certainly have loved children, to bring you up," he said irrelevantly. He had made up his mind to stick it out to the last minute, and evidently this was not yet the last minute. He still had an hour with Rat and O'Hara. Although he had made up his mind to break any promise he might make to Teck, yet he shrank from making any promise at all until there was absolutely no way out of it. Only in that way could he reconcile the thing with his inconvenient conscience.

Teck flushed, the scar on his cheek glowing redly against his face.

"Is that final?" he asked needlessly. He knew that, so far as he was concerned, it was final.

"It's damned final," said Val. "Can't you understand English?"

Teck hesitated for a brief moment, his greenish eyes shining evilly at Val. Then his moment of hesitation was over. His decision was made. He turned to the door.

"Rat! O'Hara!" he called.

These two worthies appeared promptly.

"I have to get along, boys. Give this man an hour more to promise to do what I want. If he promises, let him go. If not——" he accompanied this with a meaningful look, pregnant with wickedness—"you know."

"All right, boss," replied O'Hara. "We gotcha."

"I'm off, said Teck, and the three withdrew to the next room without a backward look at their quarry. There they had a whispered conversation of which Val could make out nothing except one phrase—"Old Point Comfort." This he heard repeated several times.

He decided that probably Teck was on his way down

to Virginia—and that Jessica Pomeroy was either down there already or on her way. Old Point Comfort is very close to Norfolk and Hampton, near where Peter Pomeroy's estate was. Undoubtedly Teck had information that led him to believe that the treasure was down there—perhaps hidden on the grounds of the Pomeroy property.

In a few minutes there was the slamming of a door, and he knew that Teck was gone. The two guards consulted with each other in a whisper in the adjoining room, and it was not long before they seemed to come to some decision, because they entered Val's room together, on business bent.

It was O'Hara who spoke first.

"Sorry you kinnot make that there promise, ole kid," he said, almost jocularly, his one good eye gleaming wickedly, in humorous contradistinction to the tightly closed, swollen blue optic that accompanied it. "Because we gotta date, me'n Rat, so we'll hafter hurry t'ings along er little."

"I didn't tell you I wouldn't promise, Horseface," retorted Val. He intended to make the promise, but he intended to wait the full hour before doing it.

"Oh, sure yer did, old millionbucks." O'Hara assured him. "Me'n me pal decided yer did. Yer too good ter live, anyway. Me'n Rat, here, we don't like yer face, see! So we're goin' ter put it where it won't bother us none. We gotta date. Open yer trap," he directed.

"What for?" asked Val.

"Well, th' proceedings is about ter begin—an' we don't want no holler outta you, so I'm goin' ter stick something inter yer mout' that'll stop th' noise," answered O'Hara.

"But look here, do you really mean to go on with this?" answered Val, alarmed for the first time. It occurred to him that these men had no wish to exact a promise from him. They simply wanted to kill him and get done with the affair. It might seem that the black eye he had given O'Hara was not sufficient cause for such vengeance as the horsefaced one intended to exact, but these things are merely relative. To a man of O'Hara's disposition a black eye was provocative to murder. That was his code, and as long as he was in power there was no one to say him nay. This flashed across Val's mind, and he saw that he was on distinctly dangerous ground. It would be well to give in at once.

"You don't really mean——" his speech was shut off by O'Hara's thumb on his windpipe, pressing until things were almost black in front of Val's eyes. He opened his mouth, gasping for breath.

"That's it, kid," said O'Hara, popping a gag into his mouth and tying it around the back of his head tightly.

Trussed hand and foot, and gagged, Val looked up at the pair helplessly.

"Pretty little t'ing, ain't he?" asked Rat.

"Yeah. Too bad he's gotta shuffle off so young. Well, it's ther way of all flesh in dis here vale er tears."

The world went black in front of Val's eyes for a moment. This was something he had not looked for. This pair of scoundrels actually intended to put an end to his life at once. Up to now it had been more or less of a game to Val, because he knew that he had but to say the word, and he would be released. But things had suddenly got out of hand even more than Teck

himself had intended. These two men did not mean to give him a chance to promise anything. They simply intended to finish him and be done with it.

For the first time a twinge of fear passed through Val. It was one thing to get killed in the trenches, and he had seen many die on all sides of him; it was still another thing to be murdered in cold blood by a pair of murderers who seemed to look upon the matter as a joke.

"Say yer prayers, dearie," mocked O'Hara. "Window closed?" he asked Rat.

"Yep. Door closes tight enough, I guess."

"Sure t'ing. Only takes a few minnits to put dis bird outta his misery."

Val looked up at them impotently. So this was to be the end for him. He could hardly believe it, and yet—it did not seem as though there was any way out. Black despair edged into his heart, and shaded its way across his face. He was helpless; he was theirs to do with as they pleased. He tried to look at things stoically, but it was hard. He felt that he could die easily, fighting, but this way, a rat in a trap—it was too much to expect a man to bear that stoically.

Momentarily terror struck its way deep into his soul; it was a fearsome way to die—to die thus deliberately and slowly, conscious that he was dying, yet with no kind of a chance of saving himself. He surmised the method of execution—illuminating gas. An eternity went by as he lay there watching them in this last moment, yet in reality it was but a few seconds.

"All set?" queried O'Hara. The other nodded. "Let's go."

He reached up and turned on the cock of the un-

lighted gas jet. He turned out the lighted one and turned that on again. To Val's strained ears came a slight hissing, faintly like escaping steam.

"Good night, pretty boy," mocked O'Hara.

They went out and closed the door tightly.

A pungent, sweetish odor, the odor of illuminating gas, came to Val's nostrils. With the closing of the door the first thought that came to Valentine Morley was that he was dying. He was young, healthy, in full possession of his senses, yet in a few moments this body of which he was so conscious would be a senseless piece of clay, unfeeling and cold. He was dying. With each breath he came closer and closer to death and yet he could not stop breathing.

In sudden moments like this, hopeless moments, it has been said that all a man's past life is reviewed by him swiftly, kaleidoscopically. Yet it was not so with Val.

One thought only was in his mind, and that is the thought that he was dying, while in the next room two men waited to enter and drag out his body when all was over. He felt himself getting weaker and weaker, and he knew it was but a question of minutes. This was the end of Valentine Morley, the man who had wanted to marry Jessica Pomeroy. It was the end of a man who had held life lightly, only to find at the last that he desired life above all things.

His mind was remarkably clear, he thought, and he found it curious that he did not lose consciousness. Yet he knew he was dying. He seemed to be falling, falling, falling . . . swiftly, as in a dream. Down . . . down . . . down. . . .

He came to himself with a jerk. Against the window pane opposite his couch a dark form pressed . . . a

face that peered in. He longed to shout, but his gag prevented him. So he was not yet dead! He wondered why—he should be, by now, he decided. He looked at the window pane again.

The face was still there. Quietly the figure outside the window put forth an arm and raised the window, softly, noiselessly. Just as noiselessly he let himself into the room, moving like a ghost. He flashed his pocket flashlight on the figure of Val on the couch.

"All right, Mr. Morley," he whispered softly, and a great pean of thanksgiving burst out in the heart of Val. It was the voice of Eddie Hughes!

Eddie whipped out his knife and cut the gag. "The gas, Eddie!" whispered Val sibilantly. "It's on!"

Swiftly Eddie turned off the two jets.

There was a stirring in the next room. A hand was laid on the door. Like a shadow Eddie leaped to the door, standing behind it. The door opened, letting a stream of light into the room.

"Oughtta be all over by now," came the voice of O'Hara as he and the Rat stepped in. "I don't smell no——"

With a groan he slumped down on the floor in a heap, dead to a heedless world. The butt of Eddie's automatic had found its mark. The other whirled only to look down the barrel of Eddie's gun.

"Stick 'em up!" grated Eddie.

The other's hands shot toward the ceiling.

"Attaboy!" applauded Val from his couch. "Cut me loose, will you, Eddie. I'm tired of staying here."

"Just a sec, Mr. Morley," said Eddie. "Hey, you," he said to his prisoner, "untie those cords—an' don't try nothing funny, either—or it'll be your last joke."

Impelled by the ominous blue black automatic, the

Rat did as he was bid. Awkwardly Val arose and stretched himself. There was almost no feeling in his right leg, and he felt weak and wobbly.

"Funny I'm not dead?" he said. "I must've inhaled enough gas to kill half a dozen men. And yet—there didn't seem to be so much gas at that, Eddie. Wait a minute." He took a match out of his pocket and attempted to light the gas jet over his head.

It did not light. He tried the other. That did not light, either.

"That's funny," he mused. "Here, let's have the gat, Eddie—I'll cover him and you tie him up."

This was done, and, tightly gagged, the Rat was laid on the couch, mystified and hardly yet understanding what had happened.

"Queer about that gas," remarked Val. "Yet, I don't smell much of it in the room——"

"Nothing funny about it at all," remarked Eddie, pointing to a meter. "Do you see that?" Val nodded.

"That's a quarter meter," Eddie enlightened him. "You put in a quarter and when it is used up the gas goes out and stays out until you put in another quarter. Probably these two rooms used to be rented separately, so they have separate meters."

"Well, I'll be. . . ." burst out Val. His life had been saved by the fact that nobody had thought about putting a quarter into the meter—and the last quarter had been about used up. Evidently the supply of gas had given out almost immediately after the cock was turned on.

"How did you——" Val began, turning to Eddie.

"Never mind that now," said Eddie. "Let's get out of here first. Follow me."

He led the way through the outer room to the hall.

"Can't go down-stairs, because there's a couple of them on duty there. Can't get out the way I came in—by the waterpipe. Sure to get caught. Let's try up-stairs—the roof."

Quietly they made their way through the dark halls till they came to a ladder that led to the roof. Eddie mounted it first and pushed up the door.

"O. K.," he announced. "Come on."

. . . . . .

Ignace Teck, feeling in rather good humor with himself and the world, watched the train pull out of the station from the smoking room of the Pullman, where he sat, hands in his pockets, his mind at rest. He need no longer worry about Valentine Morley—he was out of it for good now, one way or the other. Since Morley had come into the affair, Jessica's resistance to him, passive before and not very strong, had stiffened a great deal.

He made no bones about the fact that he was afraid of what Morley could do; Morley, a good natured meddler, seemingly afraid of nothing, could knock all of his plans into a cocked hat. But that was over. Valentine Morley was put out of the way—either by his promise or by Teck's two henchmen. Teck knew them; they were not the kind to balk at murder, and it had seemed to him that they rather fancied the idea of this job. They had no love for Valentine Morley.

Well, that was over. He was on his way to Virginia, where Jessica was, and where, perhaps. . . . A pleased smile curved its way across his dark countenance as he thought about what he could do with all that money . . . and Jessica . . . she was worth while in herself. A few more days of Morley, he ad-

mitted good naturedly, and he might not have felt so sure of her.

As he gazed out of the window a man came into the smoking compartment and sat down next to Teck.

"Hello, Iggy! S'prise!" said a pleasant voice.

Teck whirled swiftly. Next to him sat Valentine Morley.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SIGHT OF HOME

It was almost noon when Jessica Pomeroy and Elizabeth arrived at the Pomeroy property, about midway between Hampton and Newport News. Germinal Washington, an old negro who had been in the service of her father and whom Jessica had picked up on landing at Old Point Comfort, had stopped off at Hampton to bring along needed groceries and other living necessities in his trap, drawn by the rawboned, halting quadruped that he fondly conceived was a horse.

Jessica and the old woman retainer, Elizabeth, had continued their way on foot for the additional two and a half or three miles to the Pomeroy estate. Both of them knew the way well, and every foot of the road was reminiscent of ancient memories to both of them. It was early autumn in Virginia; the way was a riot of color and breeze, winding away yellowly in the direction of the hills like a sinuous snake headed for the sunset. The road was dry and hard, a perfect highway for the millions of colored leaves that fled before the wind. In front of their feet a scared rabbit scudded from one side of the path to the other, to lose himself instantly in the underbrush. A red-bellied woodpecker looked at the passersby speculatively an instant, to fly off at last in haste and violent indignation at this unwarranted intrusion.

It was plain that the way was not much traveled, although Jessica knew that without looking. A car line ran from Hampton to Newport News. There is nothing between these two cities, if a few solitary farms be excepted, farms that are reached by another road. This road led only to the Pomeroy property and nowhere else, which was the reason for old Peter Pomeroy's locating there. He liked solitude, especially when certain horses were to be tried out. In this spot there would be nobody who did not have special business there. Pomeroy had found that he liked horses better than he did men—and having an intimate knowledge of both, probably he had good reason.

With the exception of Germinal Washington, who had spent many years there, it would have been difficult to induce a negro to go near the Pomeroy grounds —and even Germinal would, under no circumstances, approach the old house itself. It was said, on good local authority, that the place was haunted. Screams had been heard there late at night; lights blew out suddenly; there was the clanking of chains; all the good old supernatural standbys were "present or accounted for," to lapse for an instant into army phraseology; long, thin ghosts pointing lean, skinny fingers were said to have been seen. At any rate, the Pomeroy house was haunted, and it was only upon being assured that Jessica and her servant intended to inhabit the caretaker's lodge that Germinal consented to become a member of the party. He liked Jessica Pomeroy, having known her since she was a baby; but these ghosts seemed to have a certain preference for black men. . . .

The small, compact lodge, of course, would be better for two unattached women. In the first place, it was

completely furnished, though very probably in sad need of a dusting. On the other hand, the large house had been denuded of most of its furniture many years before. The caretaker had stayed on in the lodge until last year, after Peter Pomeroy's death. There was another cottage on the property which Peter Pomeroy and his daughter had sometimes used, but this had fallen of late years into complete disrepair, and there was no furniture of any kind in it now. During the last year or two of the old man's life he and his daughter had lived in the caretaker's lodge on their infrequent visits to Virginia.

The wayfarers stood for a moment on the last ridge that divided the Pomeroy land from the rest of Virginia. On the crest of that ridge her slight figure outlined against the sky, bonnet in her hand, her light hair blowing back from her forehead, Jessica was a modern mænad gazing upon her homeland. They stood there for a space in silence. Below them was the rude brown oval of the private racetrack that Pomeroy had built. At the far end stood the gaunt, bare house that had, in the years long past, been the only home she knew, and at the near end was the small, neat looking house where the caretaker had lived and where she now proposed to make her home for awhile.

In the distance were the hills, nebulous in a purple haze of midday sunlight, shimmering in red and blue and gold under the brush wielded miraculously by Autumn, and near the lodge glistened the playing waters of a live brook.

"It's like coming home from a far country, Elizabeth," she said at last. "No matter where you go, Elizabeth, there's a thrill about coming home that——"

"I wonder if the plumbing still works," grumbled the

materialistic Elizabeth. "It wasn't never none too good, anyway, and now that we've been away such a time——"

"Oh, stop your grumbling," interjected Jessica. "Haven't you any sentiment for the old home——"

"Well, plumbing's a very important thing, Miss Jessica," said the old woman, "an' there can't be much sentiment if the water supply is bad on account of defective plumbing——"

"All right, you old grouch," said Jessica. "You've robbed me of the first moment of pleasure I've had since we started. Let's go down to the house and see whether your old plumbing works."

"I don't see what you wanted to come back here for, anyway," said the old servitor as they started for the house. "Especially since that devil Teck is coming here too. You always said that you wouldn't come here while he——"

"I hardly know why myself, Elizabeth," said Jessica, a trifle wearily. "I know I had absolutely no intention of coming here at this time."

"Then why do you do it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Only sometimes, when he catches me with those green eyes of his, I seem to be robbed of all my will power. Some outside will—his own will, I suppose—just flows into me and seems to fill me up, forcing me to do things that I never supposed I would do. It used to be that way when I was a little girl, Elizabeth. All he used to have to do was just to look at me steadily—right into my eyes—and I would do anything he asked me. I thought it was just because I was a little girl and his was a stronger will—but now . . . I don't know . . . I suppose he still has

the stronger will. Elizabeth, did you ever look right into those green eyes of his?"

The older woman looked at her for a moment. "No," she said at length. "Ain't never had no reason to—but if he ever tries it on me I'll crown him Queen of the May—with a frying pan."

"Do you think there's anything in mental suggestion, Elizabeth?" asked the girl, more to be saying something than because she expected a reasonable answer.

"Not so long's I have a good grip on a flatiron—a heavy one—and power in me right arm, Miss Jessica. There never was no mental suggestion that could stand up against a good wallop behind the ear. Try it the next time he gets around you with them there green eyes. You'll see, Miss Jessica——"

Jessica laughed, her good humor restored. "That's no way to be talking about my future husband, Elizabeth."

The other looked up in astonishment. "Surely, Miss Jessica, you're not thinking of marrying with that devil, are you. I want to tell you right now that I give notice, if you are. No money on earth could make me work in the same house with him. But you're only joking, aren't you, Miss Jessica? You would never——"

"I don't know, Elizabeth," replied Jessica slowly. "Sometimes I think I'll just have to—you know, I sort of feel myself going . . . going . . . going . . . and then I wake up suddenly and I see that I never could do it. But one of these days. . . ."

"I wonder what Mr. Morley is doing to-day," wondered Elizabeth, rather irrelevantly, it seemed to Jessica.

"Why, what's he got to do with it?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," came back Elizabeth, meaningly. "Now, about that there plumbing. . . ." So they went on, but a new twist had been given to Jessica's train of thought. Why should she think of Valentine Morley now? And why should he, subconsciously, have been in her mind since she had started yesterday? Why should she feel as though, somehow, she would be safer if he were somewhere near her? Probably he had already forgotten her, she decided, after the rude manner in which she had broken up their little dinner party the night before.

And yet . . . if only he were here. Of course, he had said that she had but to call him, and he would come. But did men really mean such things when they said them? Would he actually come all the way down to Virginia just because she had called him? She was not sure of that; neither had she a reason for calling him, so far as she could see. She was in no danger; she was on her own property, in her own house. As for Teck, normally she was not afraid of him. It was only when he seemed to take possession of her, as last night, that she was afraid. Probably at this moment Mr. Morley was having lunch with some New York society girl.

Which was distinctly wrong, because at this moment Valentine Morley was lying, bound hand and foot, on a couch in Ignace Teck's bedroom, very thirsty and very hungry—wondering where she was, and if he would ever see her again. Also, he was wondering if he would ever taste water again.

They found the cottage in fair livable condition. Most of the furniture was still there, intact, though very dusty. There was a full complement of linen,

both bed and table linen. The cutlery, spoons, forks, etcetera, for the table, were rather sketchy, but they decided the equipment would be adequate enough.

There were three bedrooms upstairs. Jessica made Elizabeth take herself the bedroom adjoining hers. These things being decided upon, the women started in to dust and to clean—superficially, at least, because it would have taken days, they decided, to give this house the cleaning it really deserved. However, they felt much better after the first layer of dust had been taken off. Now if Mr. Morley should happen by any chance to come avisiting. . . .

Now why had Jessica thought of that? She smiled and shook her head, but could not say. All she knew was that it had suddenly popped into her head. And yet, why should he come . . . she had not sent for him . . . in fact, how could she expect him to know where she was? And yet, she had that feeling as though she would scarcely be surprised if the door opened and he walked in on her, smiling and glad to be there. In fact, she more or less expected it.

She was downstairs in the living room, at the time, with a view of the front door through the little hall, diagonally, and the door did, in fact, open at this moment. Jessica started visibly, seized the towel that was bound about her head, rolled down her sleeves, threw the towel beneath the table, and gave two or three futile but distinctly feminine pats to her hair, all in the space of three quarters of a second. The door opened wider and admitted the visitor.

Germinal Washington, staggering under a tremendous grocery basket, edged his way in, puffing but cheerful.

"Phew!" he perspired orally and vocally. "Food

suttinly heavy. Some food. Where at this stuff go, Miz' Jessica?"

"In the kitchen of course, stupid," snapped Jessica at him, though she was forced to admit, mentally, that it wasn't poor Germinal's fault that he was not Valentine Morley.

Lunch, as cooked by Elizabeth and served by Germinal, was a satisfying affair, and after it was over Jessica decided that she would be the better for a nap; they had traveled far and she was tired, though she felt it now for the first time. She told Elizabeth to take a nap for the rest of the afternoon, and retired to the pretty little room she had chosen for herself.

Fully clothed she lay down on the bed and tried to compose her mind to sleep, but it would not come. She could not help thinking of the queer circumstance of her being here at this time. Yesterday, at this hour, she had no thought of Virginia, and to-day she was here. . . . It was peculiar.

Why had she done as Ignace Teck required? Was there something really in thought transference . . . mental suggestion . . . hypnotism? Those greenish eyes . . . they did take hold of one.

And what did he expect to accomplish down here? That money of her father's, now . . . did he really think it was hidden somewhere on this estate? And if it was, how did he propose to go about finding it? That brought her to the thought of the books. Perhaps they held the secret. Why not? Her father had been queer, mentally, during the last few years of his life. There were those who insisted that he was not entirely sane . . . that he was a monamaniac on the score of his money.

Perhaps that was so. If it was, there was nothing

very peculiar about his having hidden his wealth so . . . nor would she consider it out of the picture even to learn that he had made a cryptogram of the solution to the puzzle . . . that he had hidden the answer somewhere in a book. But how to find it?

The more Jessica pondered on the matter, the more she became convinced that there was a distinct possibility that the money was hidden somewhere down here, on this great estate. In fact, a probability. If a man was trying to hide a great sum of money, where could he find a better place? Trust her father to think of that. Not that he wanted to die without letting his daughter know where the money was. He loved her, she knew, and he would be greatly grieved to know that she was in need of money. But he had this in common with all men—he did not expect to die. Human beings, to a large extent, consider themselves immortal. That is, they can visualize death—of course, one must come to that in the end—but somehow, it was something that never happened to one personally. It was something that happens to everybody, death . . . but to one's self. . . . That is one of the singular psychological twists that make the way of the life insurance agent very hard indeed. If old Peter Pomeroy had thought that he was to die suddenly, he would have taken immediate steps to acquaint his daughter with the facts of the whereabouts of his money—always conceding, she murmured, that they were not mistaken, and that money really existed.

So Jessica Pomeroy at length fell asleep.

XXII

THE WARNING

Suppose you had conceived and put into execution a fine, holeproof, artistic little murder. Then, full of professional pride at the artistic and workmanlike features of the masterpiece, suppose you were sitting in a Pullman smoking room, relaxed from your labors, and more or less at peace with the world. Then suppose you had turned around suddenly and seen the supposed corpse, not decently dead, as any self-respecting corpse ought to be, but very much alive and full of pep, sitting down next to you.

Suppose these things had happened to you—how would you feel? You would probably experience a wave of resentment against said live cadaver, to say nothing of overwhelming shocked surprise, wouldn't you? That's just the way Ignace Teck felt about it when he turned and saw the substantial—even pleasant—figure of Valentine Morley easing itself into a seat next to him.

This was not one of Ignace Teck's important murders, of course. Just a little gem he had thrown off in an idle moment, before proceeding to the greater work at hand. Nevertheless, it was exasperating for a (prospective) murderer to so far interfere with the workings of art as to refuse to be assassinated—nay, even to follow Teck and mock him by the mere fact of his presence.

These are the thoughts that passed through Teck's

head as he whirled and saw Val sitting next to him. Something of what he thought showed in his eyes, evidently, because Val regarded him with scarcely concealed amusement.

"I'm not—er—in your way, Iggy, or anything like that, I hope," he suggested. "Because if I am——"

"But I thought you were——"

"Iggy, I must deny that I have been killed. No matter how it pains me to have to say it, I am alive; I am forced to the conclusion that something must have happened to upset your plans. I wonder what it could have been?" Val spoke confidentially, almost apologetically.

The other regarded him in resentful silence for a few moments. Evidently he was not dead. Val read his thoughts.

"No," he shook his head. "I did not promise anything, either. I am sort of free lancing in treasure trove, to tell you the truth, Iggy." He opened his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette for himself.

"To show you I'm more generous with my cigarettes than you are, Iggy," he said, and popped a cigarette between the parted lips of Teck. He held a light to the cigarette. Teck nodded his thanks.

"To what do I owe the honor of your company?" asked Teck, courteously, having by now recovered his composure.

"To the fact that Horseface has an awful headache by now—where my man's gun walloped him. Also to the fact that you were too stingy to put a quarter into the gas meter. You do things on too small a scale, Iggy. I hate to have to criticize a man's business, but that's what's the trouble with you—you're a piker. Now, a quarter more or less wouldn't really have done

you much harm. You would hardly feel the loss of it——"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Morley," interrupted Teck. "Or is this chatter of yours a sort of pitcher's wind-up, limbering up your voice, so to speak, for the real——"

"It's of no consequence, Desperate Desmond," Val waved him aside with an airy motion. "By the way, can you tell me any real reason why I shouldn't hand you over to the police?"

"Who, me?" inquired Teck, pained that Val should even think of such a thing. "Why? Do you mean to insinuate that I had any connection with what you claim to have been an imprisonment in my apartment? My dear boy, you could never prove anything, don't you realize that? Of course, I am speaking theoretically only, because I must deny emphatically that I know anything about the matter. You are a sentimental young man. Why don't you write your stories and try to sell them to the magazines? I can assure you——"

"I'm not talking of that, Iggy. That's a score I intend to settle with you personally—nobody else can do it as well as I. I'm talking about poor old Mat Masterson. I know you murdered him, and I intend to have you pay the penalty——"

"Nonsense," said Teck. "You can prove nothing of the sort. And even if you think you can——"

"I don't have to prove anything," said Val. "All I have to do is to tell the police that you're the bird who stole the books. After that it shouldn' be so hard, even for our police."

"Well, why don't you do it?" suggested Teck, unconcerned.

"Why, I'm sort of saving you up, Iggy——"

"I must ask you again not to address me as Iggy. My name is Ignace——" began Teck with a trace of irritation.

"You mean, on such short acquaintance?" asked Val. "That raises a rather fine point in etiquette, doesn't it? When do you know a man well enough to call him by a diminutive of his name? On the other hand, how intimate ought you to be with a man before attempting to murder him? I don't think one should do it at the first or second meeting, anyway—but, you see Iggy, what fine, technical points we will be involved in if we pursue this train of thought? To get back to the original theorem, why shouldn't I hand you over to the police?"

"Because," said Teck, "if you hand me over to the police it will absolutely involve Jes——"

"Nonsense, I've heard that argument before. Don't bank on it too heavily. Murder is murder, and must be punished, no matter whom it involves," replied Val. "Under ordinary circumstances, perhaps I would mind my own business and say nothing—although such an affair is the business of every citizen. But when I see you brazenly going down South to make more trouble—to attempt to steal from a poor, fatherless girl her inheritance—to say nothing of attempting to intimidate her into marrying you, it makes me angry enough to cast all consideration to the winds and hand you into custody. Miss Pomeroy will have no difficulty in clearing herself. And as for——"

"And as for you, how will you clear yourself?" inquired Teck calmly. "Remember, that you knew most of the facts the next day—that you have known for some days now that I have the books—and you have

said nothing to the police about it. It rather makes you an accessory after the fact, doesn't it? There's a penalty for that."

"I'm not worrying about my end of it, Iggy," replied Val, though it occurred to him that Teck was probably correct. "All I have to say is that if I were you I'd get off this train at the first stop and go back to where I came from. Because I'm going to get you——" his eyes flashed with the first show of emotion during the conversation, "and I'm going to get you right. You're going to go to the chair if it takes every nickel I have to convict you—and as for Miss Pomeroy, you'd better lay off any ideas you may have about getting her money—to say nothing about marrying her. You—marry that girl!" He looked his contempt and Teck had the grace to flush, though his flush was called out by anger and not by shame.

"Well, we'll see about that, Morley. And now, as long as there are warnings being handed out, I want to tell you that the next time you interfere with me in any way there'll be no such blundering as happened the last time. I want to tell you—straight—that you'd better not butt into this affair. It's none of your business and——"

Val laughed. "You should get the police to protect you in the peaceful pursuit of your business, Iggy. You've got nerve enough, too. And don't run away with the notion that I'm going home, either. I'm going down to where Miss Pomeroy is—and I'm going to stay there until she tells me to go. And now . . ." he rose and threw away the fag end of his cigarette, "I'm going to turn in. I advise you not to be within reaching distance to-morrow morning."

XXIII

ON FAMILIAR GROUND

That Ignace Teck should go down south to hunt for the missing money was logical, Val pondered. That, of course, would probably be its hiding place. But that Miss Jessica Pomeroy should go down at the same time—he could hardly reconcile that.

Unless, of course, she had not gone of her own volition. Which was very probable, he considered. Teck, he was sure, would not feel quite easy in his mind if he, Val, had a clear field with Jessica while Teck was away. Val knew that Teck was very well aware that, given a little time, he could easily win Jessica away from him. It would have been a strategical error that Ignace Teck would hardly be guilty of. That being the case, Val could hardly be amazed at Teck's anger to find that Val was coming down to Virginia, too. He must have seemed to Teck—he grinned at the remembrance—like a Little Old Man of the Sea.

Nevertheless, Val spent a restful night in his lower berth—and Eddie in his upper managed to get sufficient sleep, too. They were awakened the next morning before the train pulled into Cape Charles, the end of that branch line and the point of embarkation for Old Point Comfort, across Chesapeake Bay.

In the bustle of baggage and travelers, they caught only one glimpse of Teck—on the boat just before it

steamed in to Old Point Comfort, in the lee of the great, rambling Hotel Chamberlin.

It was a bright sunny morning, and Val, leaning against the rail of the steamer, with Eddie standing just behind him, enjoyed the sail thoroughly. Chesapeake Bay had never been so sparkling, so calm; and to the right, in the distance, the grim, sullen guns of Fortress Monroe brooded over the Bay and Hampton Roads, powerful, menacing and silent; here and there an impertinent three-inch gun showed its black shield and saucy muzzle. Far over towards Lynhaven Straits is Fort Wool, and towards Norfolk is the narrow strip of land dignified by the name of Willoughby Spit, a four mile splinter of Virginia sand that at no place is so broad that one could not stand in its center and throw a half brick into the waters on either side.

It awoke memories in Val. During the early days of the war he had been stationed at the Officers' Training School at Fortress Monroe—the school of the big guns. But Fortress Monroe, and Old Point Comfort on a sunny day, approached from the sea—these are not things to forget quickly. Val's blood quickened as, far inland, he caught a sudden glimpse of the parade ground, bordered by the old brown and red brick barracks; to the right of that Battery Parrott reared its menacing bastion, and further inland he knew exactly where the mortar batteries were stationed, great black steel bulldogs that yawned at the sky and threatened the stars.

In the foreground was the Hotel Chamberlin, which Val decided to make his headquarters.

It was only a few minutes' ride from Hampton, near where the Pomeroy estate was, he knew; it should be central enough for all his activities. He looked to-

ward the fort, and from where he stood he could just catch a glimpse of Jeff Davis's tree on the parade ground, a great, shady bulk, dignified in its size and its age. He caught himself humming a snatch of the training camp song:

Black Jack Pershing sez, sez 'e,
"Send along another batch a' Coast Artiller-ee——"
. . . . . .
Roarious! Roarious!
We'll make the Coast Artill'ry glorious;
Fill 'er up with shell
An' we'll give the beggars hell
As we drive the —— —— out of France!

His blood quickened as he stepped on the familiar dock.

"To the Chamberlin, Eddie," he directed, as Eddie grasped their two suitcases. "Squads right! Column left! March!"

Eddie grinned and executed the movements, pretending that Val was an officer. It pleased him to remember, however, that Val was no more an officer than he himself was—before finishing his course Val had been ordered to France as part of a replacement battalion in the trench mortar corps. It was there he met Eddie—one night in a shell hole, where they had cemented their friendship in cold, soggy "canned willie" and rather muddy water—water that was suitable for drinking, perhaps, but certainly not for bathing.

There was a crowd registering at the desk, and Val and Eddie held back until it thinned out a bit. When Val registered he looked the page of the register over carefully. Four names above his was the name of Ignace Teck—room three hundred and thirty. Val and Eddie were assigned rooms three fifty-five and six, on the same floor, which suited Val well.

Both rooms, he found, opened on a porch which ran the whole of the seaward length of the house. French windows, opening outwards, gave access to this sun-porch. After a brief inspection, Val left Eddie to open the suitcases and distribute their clothes in the closets while he went downstairs to reconnoiter.

In front of the hotel he found a decrepit, ancient touring car, labeled "For Hire." The driver lounged in the seat, but he snapped to attention as Val approached.

"How much?" asked Val.

"Four dollars an hour."

"I mean for a week—I want to drive it myself," replied Val.

The owner considered for a moment. "Cost you a hundred an' seventy-five bucks," he announced at length. "How do I know you won't damage the car?"

"You don't know, young feller," smiled Val. "But I'm paying twice as much as it's worth, so you're taking no chance. Get me?"

"Where ya stoppin'?" asked the driver.

"Chamberlin."

The preliminaries were arranged at the desk of the hotel, and in a few moments Val found himself in temporary possession of a touring car. He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, regarding the car intently. Now that he had a car, there was, of course, but one use to put it to. That is, to drive out to where Jessica was stopping. Of what other use is a car, anyway? There was no answer to this, so he hopped in and drove off, perkily, in the direction of Hampton, where he expected he would receive correct information as to the location of the Pomeroy house.

XXIV

"TO-NIGHT AT THE OLD HOUSE!"

He found no difficulty in Hampton about being directed to the Pomeroy place. Everybody in Hampton knew the place, and the instructions he received as to how to go about finding it were explicit, to say nothing of being verbose.

He sent his car forward along the path indicated; it was a narrow path, and ordinarily a car would have trouble there, but Val's was not that kind of a car. He smiled at the platitude—"you can drive it in places where you could never get in with a big car"—and drove merrily on his way. Nobody had told him that Jessica was down here—but if she was not down here then where was she? He hardly gave that end of it a thought, because all his theory and all his wishes proved conclusively to him that she was here. Wasn't that glorious sunlight? And the blue haze that surrounded the tops of those distant hills—something splendid about that, wasn't there? And the woods, and the chattering squirrels, and the leaves beginning to turn such gorgeous colors! Why, of course Jessica was down here.

He thought, idly, about the hidden—or lost—Pomeroy money; but money in itself could not mean much to this modern Crœsus, so the matter was not prominent at the moment in his mind. It gave place quickly to the peculiar glint of the sunlight that he

had noticed deep in the coils of Jessica's hair. He liked that; there was nothing of the brazen chemistry about it that he always noticed in openly blonde hair, even though it was natural blonde; it was like the souls of some women—you had to dig rather deep before you got to it, but what a reward if you were lucky!

He rather liked that idea, not knowing that some of it was by Swinburne out of Browning. And then there was that tiny light in her eyes, away inside, deep, like a hidden pool in a cave where a level ray of the sunset just manages to touch it once, for an instant. Then it is gone—but you remember it for a long time. He believed he had seen the light like that in her eyes once; and he liked to pretend to himself that Teck had never seen it. Which probably, was true.

They saw the car from a distance as he maneuvered it around the many curves before he could draw up near them. But he caught a glimpse of a neat, trim little figure, and one or two flying wisps of hair; it was all he needed to establish her identity. Funny, wasn't it, that he should know that nobody but Jessica could wear a dress like that—that nobody but Jessica could have it blown by the wind in just that manner. He wondered whether she could recognize him at that distance—at any distance, no matter how great; he would have been surprised indeed to know that she could.

His car came to a grinding halt at the side of the house, where Jessica stood, waving her hand at him cordially.

"You would think that one could have seclusion, buried deep in Virginia——" she began, giving him her hand.

"Not so long as men aren't like underground fishes,

blind," he smiled. "You can hide your light deep in the woods if you like, Miss Pomeroy, but I'll make a beaten path to your door."

Val jumped out of the car and walked with her around to the front entrance of the house.

"It's just lunch time," she announced. "You'll stay, of course."

Would he stay? He had to smile as he nodded to indicate his complaisance.

Lunch was gay. With the advent of Val the girl was able to cast off the blue restraint that had been on her spirit for the last two days, like a filmy pall that hampered without binding. Teck's influence on her, she noticed, was at its lowest ebb when this new, strangely interesting man was there. They talked of many things; of a Turner sunset in the museum, Gauguin, Arnold Daly in "Candida," they discovered a mutual love for big league baseball and for a rattling good detective story, with many murders and the mystery kept up to the last page, automobiles, Chaliapin—and thus by devious and round-about stages they came down to themselves and their business here, and Teck.

"Who told you I was down here?" she asked.

"Why, nobody—I just guessed it. About the money, I suppose," he ventured. She nodded a little, gravely.

"I met Teck on the train, coming down," he announced casually, attempting a nonchalance about this man's name and presence that he by no means felt.

He could see the alarm flash into her eyes. In an instant her gay exterior was stripped from her like the mask it was; weighing heavily on her, always, was the menace of Teck; she forgot it sometimes, for a

brief moment, but it came back at a word, a glance, a thought, more somber and more sinister than before.

"Then he'll be here——"

"Any minute, I suppose," replied Val. "I say, let's go for a walk—you could show me the grounds, you know. I'll look them over and tell you where the money is," he promised.

"That'll be good," she said soberly, rising.

She showed him the racetrack, the south end of which was less than fifty yards from the house. They walked around it in silence for some time, admiring the dogwood with its splendor of foliage and fruit, seeing ever the far off hills in front of them, feeling the slight breeze on their faces, and knowing that they two were together and that it was the springtime of life though the year was at the fall.

They said little for a long time, yet they felt close to each other, drawn by an indefinable yet irresistible bond, a community of interests and tastes, perhaps, that neither could put into words—unnecessary as words were. When they did talk it was of trivialities, of light, immaterial things, of the blue sea at Capri or a sunset across Coronado Bay, when you take the ferry from San Diego, of Madame Butterfly and of Elinor Glyn, of adolescence and of age, of the fact that the motion pictures, which could have been an art, had become nothing but an industry, a business for business men, of a prelude of Rachmaninoff's—not *the* prelude, but another which both were familiar with and which both decided was the better . . . of sealing wax . . . of cabbages . . . of what young people talk when they foregather and their blood runs warm and strong. . . .

The sun was going down rapidly when they suddenly,

discovered that they had been walking for several hours; that day was almost over. At this time they were near the bare old Pomeroy house.

"That's the old house—where nobody lives, isn't it?" asked Val.

She nodded. "They say it's haunted," she said.

"That's fine," he replied. Why not a haunted house, along with all the other paraphernalia of mystery—the investiture of romance. "That's bully," he said again. They regarded it closely from where they stood, and in the dying light they could very easily have brought themselves to the persuasion that beings not of this earth walked the place. Why not?

It was gaunt and bare, with a lone stone chimney that stood up against the dying light like a great skinny finger; there was not a whole pane of glass in the windows—the storms had done their work well; all about it was an air of loneliness, of an aloofness from the world, of a thing which was different, of something that was a connecting link between the past and the present and yet not of either; there was about the house an aura of supernatural things, of knowledge of the shapes that go by night. It was just a tumble down old house that was dying from lack of attention and repair, yet it seemed more than that to the young couple as they stood there in the waning light and regarded it closely.

"You couldn't get a negro to go as close as this to the place for all the money in the world," she said.

"I guess many white men wouldn't care to be hanging around it very much, either," he added. "Especially at night. I don't know what it is, there's something about the old place . . . I know it's foolish, of course, but . . ."

She nodded in understanding. "I know. That's just the way I feel. Let's go back—Elizabeth'll think something's happened to me." They turned towards the little house.

They were silent for a while after that, each busy with thoughts that found no outward expression. It was Val that broke the silence at last.

"If I were old Peter Pomeroy," he said slowly, "and I had a lot of money to hide—now, where would I put it?" he asked himself, though he was speaking aloud.

She looked at him in comprehension. "Perhaps," she said, "in the old house——"

He assented. "That's just it. It seems to me that I'd put it in a place where nobody was likely to go near it. That's the old house, of course. No chance of anyone going near it there—to find the money by accident. Anybody who finds it there will have gone there purposely—and, of course, only you and Teck are supposed to know anything about it. I rather think we'd better explore the old place."

"To-morrow," she replied. "I'll be glad to have you come along with me——"

"To-morrow Teck will be there," he said, and she stared at him peculiarly.

"Teck?"

"Teck," he repeated. He can reason these things out as easily as we can—and I don't believe he's going to waste any time. He's got somebody with him—a member of his gang, I think—I noticed them together on the boat from Cape Charles; you can rest assured that he'll be there to-morrow, unless he has better information where the money is; and I don't think he has, though he has the books. . . . ." this last was

an afterthought. Val was beginning to be sure that the secret of the hiding place lay in the books.

"We'll go with him, if he goes," announced Jessica.

"Maybe," assented Val doubtfully. They walked in silence for a moment or two then, turning this phase of it over in their minds. If Teck was to be there to-morrow—and that seemed probable——

"Why not go to-night?" asked Val suddenly, carrying out this reasoning.

"To-night—to that house?" she asked slowly. Then, "Why not? We can forestall him that way——"

"All right, it's a go," said Val. "I'm going back to the hotel to see my man—I'll bring him back with me—I'll get out about eight-thirty. Is that all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, that'll be fine."

They were almost at the house now.

"Well, so long for now," said Val, running for his car. He waved his hand at her.

"So long," she waved back at him. He started the car and was off.

Before jerking out of sight around a curve he looked back once. At the front door stood Jessica, gazing after him—next to her stood the giant, nonchalant, careless figure of Ignace Teck.

XXV

THE WINGS OF THE NIGHT

George Moore has said, somewhere, that the entrance of a woman into a room is like a delicious change of light. And Moore, as everyone knows, is by way of being an expert about women; he is an amateur of women, an amorist. All this being so, his words ought to carry the weight of an authority with them. And in order to demonstrate the truth of his assertion, one has but to note the effect of Jessica Pomeroy upon Valentine Morley.

The entrance of Jessica upon Val's life had just the effect Moore has described; he had an inner change of light. His inner light, to that time, had been a little drab tinged with blue—a delicate blue, to be sure, but blue nevertheless; blue, conceded to be the color dedicated to dejection and moroseness, ennui and weariness. Somehow, just the sight of Jessica, the knowledge of being in the same world with her, had changed his coloring. His inner coloring, the subconscious coloring that Freud might have understood in him, had changed to a pinkish, old-rose tint. Suns were shining, birds were singing their fool heads off, the Giants and Yankees were winning, prohibition didn't prohibit so terribly much—the golf course of Life was nothing but a long, wide, rolling, undulating, closely cropped fairway, with not a bunker or a ditch

or a sand trap, not a hint of hazard or rough. This was the effect of Jessica upon Val.

These were the things of which Val thought as he jerked his way back to the hotel in his antiquated, horseless bus. A week ago life had been nothing but a dull round to him; getting up, getting through the day and evening in a half-hearted fashion, going to bed again, and repeat ad lib and ad infinitum. That was life. Now things were different. There was a zest to living, a purpose in Life—he expressed it in capital letters. And all because a girl had hair that had a hint of color in its depths . . . and those eyes! . . . this was good for another fifteen minutes with Val, until he pulled up in front of the hotel.

He found Eddie Hughes standing outside the hotel, talking animatedly to what was obviously a newly found friend. Eddie spotted him as soon as his car drew up at the curb; asking his acquaintance to wait, he hastened to speak to Val.

It appeared that the friend was not a new friend at all; it was a friend he had known in the army. There had been talk of going to the moving pictures in Hampton, the "supper show," which finished about nine or thereabouts. He would like to go, but only if there was no need of him this evening.

This rather fitted in with Val's ideas; although he had intended to take Eddie along, yet there seemed to be no real reason for doing so. There seemed no possible chance of danger; and if there was, Val rather had an idea he could handle the situation by himself. He told Eddie in a few words how to get out to the Pomeroy place, and what he intended to do to-night. Eddie was to follow him after the show, and wait for him at Jessica's cottage.

"You're really going out to that there haunted house to-night?" asked Eddie.

"Yes," said Val. "Why?"

Eddie's brow clouded. Perhaps he had been a little too swift with the moving picture stuff, anyway. Here was something that promised more fun than images on a canvas sheet, and he wasn't going to be in it. It was exasperating.

"I might try to get off from this pitcher stuff," he suggested, "if you'll just wait a minute——"

"No, that's all right, Eddie," said his employer benevolently. "I want you to have a good time. Go right ahead and enjoy yourself."

"I know," muttered Eddie, "but I think I might—"

"No, give yourself no concern over that," said his employer with magnanimity. "Take a little holiday for a couple of hours," he suggested with a touch of unholy and malicious joy. He knew that the heart of Eddie was aching to come along to the haunted house—and now that he had decided on going without Eddie he intended to stick to it.

"All right, sir," replied Eddie, turning towards his friend with resignation in his eye. "But if you get killed I don't want you to lay the blame on me——"

"That's all right," said Val gravely. "If I get killed I'll never say a word about the matter to you. Run along now, and enjoy yourself."

"It looks like rain," Eddie predicted gloomily, examining the sky judicially. "Perhaps——"

"Oh, beat it!" snapped Val. "I'm going in to dinner."

There was no dressing for dinner, of course; primarily, because Val intended to hasten right back to Jessica's place after dinner, and a dinner jacket was

not suitable wear for use among the spiders and dust of the old Pomeroy home; secondarily, because Val had no dinner jacket with him.

Val regaled himself with a fine old southern dinner, running the gauntlet of waffles with real honey, fried chicken as only a Virginia chef can negotiate it, sweet potatoes, a salad for which the chef was famous, and coffee that was percolated on the table, in front of his eyes, until it was of just the desired amber shade. This he mixed with cream that had seen a cow recently. All in all, it was a meal to remember, not because of its complexity and its frills—it had few of those, and it was as simple a meal as one could wish—but because of the thorough wizardry of the cooking and the punctilious efficiency of the service.

Val pondered a little on the presence of Teck with Jessica when he last saw her, but he dismissed the matter as being, at the moment, inconsequential. There was a score to settle with Teck, and he intended to attend to the settling thereof himself, but there was nothing to worry about to-night. He was with Jessica, to be sure, but Val knew now that Jessica hated him and loathed him, whereas his own, Val's, star was in the ascendant, as he jubilantly admitted to himself. Jessica was in no danger from the man to-night, Val decided. Surely she would not ask him to stay to dinner; he would leave early, and that evening the field would be open for Val and Jessica to pay that visit to the old Pomeroy house.

He planned all this, laying it out to his satisfaction; he decided on what he would say to Jessica and what she would say to him; he plotted out the exact setting of the stage when he finally found the treasure; her words of gratitude, which he would wave aside lightly,

as though it were a small thing he had done. It was pleasant to smoke one's cigar like this and to think these thoughts here, in the light, after a satisfying dinner.

The sky was overcast and lowering when Val started out after dinner. The street lamps in Old Point Comfort dispelled the gloom but faintly, and in a few minutes he was out of their range altogether, swallowed up in the dark gloom of a chilly Virginia night.

At Hampton he stopped, sought out a hardware store, and bought a small lantern. He figured he would need it at the old house. He had it filled carefully with oil, saw that the wick extended the proper distance, and was on his way in a very short time.

Down the winding paths to the Pomeroy place he chugged. He saw the lights of the cottage long before he came close to it, and it came to him suddenly that perhaps Teck was still there. How could he tell whether Teck had already gone, or not? That being the case, it occurred to him that he had better come on the scene as quietly as possible. He did not want Teck to know that he was here to-night; if he intended to work without interruption, it would be better that Teck did not know. Certainly the handless one would take means to prevent his searching for the treasure. Teck would not give up so easily as that.

A quarter of a mile from the cottage Val parked his car by the side of the road, well out of sight, and continued on foot. Silently he crept up to the cottage, merging with the shadows on the road, carrying his unlighted lantern in one hand. At the cottage Val crept up to one of the lighted living room windows and glanced in through the light curtains.

He had done well in making his entrance upon the

scene a silent one, because three figures sat in the living room. In one corner sat Elizabeth, the old woman, dozing over a book. On a chair next to the table, where the lamp's circle of light fell on him revealingly, sat Teck. The conversation, Val could see, was desultory. Jessica glanced once at her wrist watch, a little troubled, while Val looked, and he knew of what she was thinking. Teck sat there, suave, smiling, and a little bland, carrying the bulk of the conversation. Outside crouched Val, a dark figure making one with the still darker background.

Far off, at the other end of the track, Val could see a darker blotch against the sky, which he was pretty sure was the old Pomeroy house, the one he was to explore this night. The track showed, a little lighter in the gloom than the surrounding country. Around Val twittered the night life of the countryside, and somewhere in the rear of the house a mandolin rang into being, shattering the night softly with an old sea song, in the quavering voice of old Germinal, who had followed the sea in his youth.

Oh, fare yo' well, oh, fare yo' well, us kin stay no mo' wid yo', ma love,
So set down yo' licker an' dat gal fum off yo' knee,
Fo' de wind, she come ter say,
"Yo' mus' take me wile yo' may,
Does yo' go ter Mothah Carey!
(Walk her down ter Mothah Carey!)"
Oh, we's gwine ter Mothah Carey whah she feeds dem chicks at sea!

Val smiled at the incongruity of the song, a song which should be roared by the combined chorus of the forecastle; Germinal squeaked and quavered, accompanied by the clicking of his mandolin, in a great deal less than the proper volume and fullness of voices.

Yet it combined with the darkness, and the yellow

shaft of light which streamed from the window, to produce in Val a feeling that he was enveloped by this dark Virginia night; he shivered slightly in the somewhat chilly wind; he watched for a moment or two longer, and slipped back into the shadows, one with the night.

The question was one of expediency. What was to be done? While one could not always be sure, because there was such a variable quality about Teck, yet it appeared to Val as though Teck were planted there for the whole evening—perhaps even the night. There was something so solid, so permanent, about the way he sat on that couch. Something so smug about the way he regarded Jessica when he caught her glancing at her wrist watch; probably he had made up his mind that if he himself was not going to hunt for old Pomeroy's treasure that night, Jessica would not, either. As to Val, he probably had not given a thought to him to-night, not believing that Val would start an independent hunt of his own.

So Val pondered, every once in a while glancing in at the window again to see whether or not Teck was planted as firmly as before. He was. Always. As he slipped back into the shadows, he thought he heard a movement behind him, slight as the soughing of the wind through the trees, yet distinguishable from the other surrounding night noises.

He whirled instantly, but could make out nothing in the blackness that enveloped him. He shrugged his shoulders and called himself a fool for being as jumpy as a child during a ghost story. It had been just the movement of one of the bushes. He settled into the shadow of the lee of the bush and stayed there for a few moments.

Somehow, the feeling that he was not alone would not down. Of course it had been the rubbing of the twigs in the wind, but Val felt that perhaps it had not been. Suppose it had only seemed like that. Suppose . . .

He strained his eyes into the night on all sides of him. Softly, silent as a cat, he padded around two sides of the house. He could see nothing. To him on the wings of the night came the song of Germinal:

> Yo' made me whut Ah is terday,
> Ah hopes your satisfied,
> Yer dragged muh down an' down until
> Tha heart within muh dah-eye-d. . . .

Val went back to his post at the window. There was no change in the position of the three within. Elizabeth was still dozing, Jessica was attempting to appear unconcerned at the passing of time, and Teck was a Gibraltar of permanence. Val could hear nothing of what was being said, but he could see that the handless one was doing most of the talking. He was arguing in his quiet, emotionless fashion, his ugly scar standing out redly against the pasty skin of his face, and his slit shaped eyes gleaming at Jessica purposefully and—Val thought—evilly.

Jessica was slightly paler than usual; he could see that Teck was trying to argue her into something, some course of action, perhaps; he could see, too, that Jessica was standing firm in her refusal, and would continue to stand firm. His impulse, of course, was to enter and put an end to the conversation. That, however, would scarcely be in accordance with the plans. He considered that it was just as well that Teck did not know he was there. It was a trump in the game—the value of surprise was in it. He de-

cided to save it to the end—to play his trump only if necessary. At present, whatever Teck was saying, he seemed harmless enough, in spite of his great weight and strength. A man with no hands cannot do much upon the offence, quoth Val to himself.

And yet, this man had an uncanny way of doing things that you might scarcely have thought possible. Val was practically certain that it was Teck himself who had struck him down in the vestibule of Jessica's house; though he had no actual proof, he was equally certain that it was Teck who had done poor old Mat Masterson to death. It was the kind of job that he believed Teck himself would do.

How were these things done? Val gave it up for the moment, yet he promised himself that these were things he would find out, riddles he would unravel before he and this giant monstrosity were through with each other. This man was a power for evil in the life of Jessica; even if it had not been for the personal assaults committed on his person by Teck and his men, Val would have felt privileged to interfere. His love for Jessica gave him that right. He intended to settle with Teck for good—and he intended to do that in the immediate future.

That was his reason for not handing over the man to the police. There were too many loose ends. There were things he had to discover; unexplained incidents that he wished to explain to his own satisfaction before he took such a decisive action. He wished, for instance, to know why the books were so important. He wanted to find out their secret from Teck—the secret that made even murder seem justifiable to the handless one. What was it these books held? Was it the secret to the treasure? Perhaps—but Val had

looked through them carefully, and could find nothing.

Was it possible that Teck was as much at sea concerning the whereabouts of the hidden money—if any, Val added—as he was? These were things for him to find out, Val decided. If Teck knew where the money was—if he had wrested the answer from the books—was it not likely that he would have gone at once about the business of getting possession of it, instead of sitting here with Jessica, looking as though he intended to stay the entire evening? Val thought it quite likely that this was so; that Teck did not yet know much about the hiding place of the Pomeroy fortune. He admitted, however, that Teck might be in possession of a rather shrewd idea of its whereabouts. Otherwise, why should he have been in such a hurry to get down here?

Val realized that he was dangerous to Teck—that is, that Teck must consider him dangerous. For Teck had not only to find the hidden wealth, he had to get away with it. And he would not be able to do that while Val was there, watching his every move. The money was not Teck's, but once in his possession, away from the scene—in another state—perhaps in another country—it would be an almost impossible thing to get it away from him.

With Val in this affair, however, Teck would not get away so easily, and he knew it. His problem was to eliminate Val, thought Val as he watched through the window; that is what he would do if he were Teck, and he gave the handless one credit for thinking in the same common sense way. With only Jessica to reckon with, Teck might readily make his getaway—perhaps even induce her to carry out her promise as to marrying him; with Val in the running he stood to lose both

the money and the girl. For this affair was different from the usual buried treasure hunt, where the gold belongs to the first person who turns it up. It was wealth the ownership of which was established. Decidedly, Teck would be at a disadvantage as long as Val was on the scene.

These thoughts coursed through Val's head swiftly as he stepped back from the window and merged again with the shadows alongside the road. He had run into a trap of Teck's in New York; then it was excusable, because he had no reason for thinking that Teck was laying plans to trip him up. But having had that valuable lesson, and knowing the cogent reasons Teck had for desiring his elimination, Val decided that it behooved him to watch his step and to take nothing for granted.

He was watching Teck. How did he know that one of Teck's creatures was not now watching him? He conceded that he did not know, but to satisfy himself he examined the ground round about him thoroughly again. He could find no sign of anybody watching him.

Well, perhaps Teck really did not expect anything to happen to-night. A man can't always be making plans for your murder, you know.

The thing that concerned Val most at present was the appointment he had had with Jessica to go over the old Pomeroy house. It appeared to him that she would be unable to do anything about it to-night; Teck showed no intention of taking his departure. She would certainly say nothing to him about what she wanted to do; she could hardly ask him to take his departure, because that might make him suspicious that all was not well.

All that being so, Val thought that perhaps he might run through the Pomeroy house himself. When could he find a better time? Teck was occupied. As long as he was with Jessica he could not be watching Val. And all Val wanted was time to go over the house swiftly—to determine, if he could, the possibility of treasure being hidden there. It would not take long.

He took a last glance through the lighted window. Teck was planted as solidly as before. Jessica was silent, determined. Elizabeth was sound asleep, her book having slipped off her lap to the floor.

"Well, here goes," Val said to himself, picking up his lantern.

In the shadow of the bushes, he made his way off into the direction of the gaunt old house. The plaintive voice of Germinal followed him down the road:

> Dis am de end ob er poifeck day,
> Near de end ob a joiney, too;
> But it leaves er thought which am big an' strong,
> Wid er wish what am kin' an' true. . . .

A catlike figure detached itself from the solid black of the roadside and stared after the departing Val.

XXVI

THE WHISPER ON THE STAIR

The black night oppressed Val as he hastened along the almost blotted-out road towards the old house. He traveled swiftly now, having been over the ground in the afternoon, but he could not throw off the feeling of espionage; the knowledge that he could not shake off this thing that was following him, whether human or something other than human. He laughed to himself, softly, in derision at this unaccustomed emotion of, say, something that was not quite fear, and yet approximated it in some way.

If it were only something that one could grip with both hands, something of fighting flesh and blood, he would not have given it another thought; but it seemed to Val that it was more than that; as he looked around he could see nothing but the inky vegetation at the side of the road, above him was a dull, gray-black sky, with a faint phosphorescence in the east; and around him, all around him, hemming him in on all sides were unseen hands plucking at him to hold him back, almost-heard voices warning him to turn his face away from the old house, nebulous, smoke-like specters which he could not see, yet which he felt he could almost see.

He laughed aloud once, just to hear his voice, and to throw off this feeling; his voice sounded strange and unaccustomed in the night air, as though it be-

longed to a different being; he could scarcely recognize it. And then, suddenly, the old house loomed up directly before him, black as anything this side of the pit could be, with deeper black where the windows should be.

Even from where he stood he could see that the house was the veriest shell, standing erect simply because nobody had thought to push it down. As he looked at the house, the first drop of rain fell. He moved towards the veranda, and in the shelter of the overhanging roof of the veranda he lighted his lamp quickly. Suddenly the rain came down in full force, without any more warning or preliminary; the water fell in solid sheets, beating upon the house like a waterfall on the eternal rocks.

With his lantern dispelling feebly only a trifle of the surrounding darkness, Val pushed his way in through the door, which hung precariously on one hinge. There was a vicious stab of lightning, and a rumbling of thunder, first in the distance and gradually growing closer until it terminated in a tremendous clap that shook the house to the eaves.

Val found himself in the entrance foyer, bare of furniture of any kind, with plaster hanging perilously from the walls and ceiling, his lantern making flickering shadows on the walls and in the corners. He felt something brush his feet, and heard something padding away swiftly in the darkness. Rats! Well, he wasn't afraid of rats—not after the kind he had known in the trenches.

He looked around the foyer swiftly. Outside the rain flooded the earth, a cloudburst of continuous pouring water that beat on the thin roof and walls of the house, making it reverberate like a drum. It splashed

in through the entrance door and through the windows in great splashes, as though someone outside were pouring it in in buckets. Val shivered slightly, and made his way into the living room, which opened into the entrance hall.

This was an immense room, and his little light could make but small headway against the encircling gloom that shrouded the walls and corners. He made out, in his first quick glance, that it seemed to be devoid of furniture, with the exception of a kitchen table and a pine chair that stood in the middle of the room. On the table was a tallow candle, half used. He moved forward to examine the table, for no other reason than because he was interested in these signs of recent human habitation.

The shadows danced strangely on the walls, and a spider shaded its way swiftly across the table, away from the candle, as his light fell upon it. Without warning, he heard something that momentarily turned the blood in his veins to ice.

There was the tinkling of piano keys in the room, the sound of notes as though a light finger had run rapidly up the scale. A shiver ran through him, and he whirled quickly. He saw something he had overlooked; in one of the corners was a dilapidated old square piano, of the oldest possible vintage, and a tiny shadow leaping off the brown case showed him that a rat had run across the keyboard.

He had to laugh at his attack of nerves; to think of Valentine Morley being afraid of an empty house at night, of his own shadow! Yet he realized, of course, that it was more than that; it was an atmosphere of the dark and the supernatural in which he had enveloped himself.

With an effort he threw off the feeling of oppression. A quick glance around the bare living room convinced him that, with the massive fireplace, the interior of the piano, the old fashioned mantel, and all the various other natural hiding places, it would take quite a while to go over this room as thoroughly as he should have liked. He resolved, then, to leave it for the last, in the meantime examining the rest of the house swiftly, and coming back to this room later. He had no great hope of discovering anything this night, yet he thought that, perhaps, he might have a stroke of luck; he might, in a flash, be drawn to investigate something that might otherwise take months of searching for. Anyway, he was spying out the lay of the land; he would come again, of course, and when he did he would have more than a vague notion of where to look.

He wished now he had brought Eddie Hughes with him; it would have made him feel more comfortable. That was too late, however, so with a shrug of his shoulder that was meant to be philosophical and that turned out to be a cold shiver, he went out into the entrance hall again, where he had noted the stairs that led to the upper part of the deserted house.

It was a rickety old winding staircase that led upstairs, giving off the dust in clouds as Val's feet fell on the steps; each stair creaked loudly, as though in protest at this unwarranted intrusion of an age-long privacy. Mice and rats scurried away at his approach, and the spiders in the corners of the stairs moved warningly as his shadow fell upon them.

He found nothing of any assistance to him in the upper part of the house, though he went over the empty rooms carefully. Great cracks were opened in the ceiling over his head, and in the floors under

his feet. What paper there was on the walls hung down to the floor in long panels, and in many places the plaster had come off, exposing the laths and logs beneath.

Outside the rain beat down heavily, soggily, having settled into a steady, monotonous downpour. The empty chambers and halls echoed and re-echoed to the dull beat of the storm, and the sense of oppression that Val had been experiencing all evening was heightened by the gloomy rooms and leaping shadows caused by his lantern. In the corners his light reached not at all, unless he stepped right up to them.

Once or twice he thought he heard a step downstairs, but he put it down to his imagination and to his overwrought nerves.

"Steady, Val!" he spoke aloud to himself, to calm his nerves. Don't be a baby, you big mutt. His voice rumbled peculiarly in the empty rooms, where a voice had not been raised for perhaps a generation.

He examined each room carefully, and decided there was little hope of finding anything upstairs. The walls were almost bare; there were no panels, the floors and ceiling were thin, so that nothing could be hidden in them; so thin was the floor that if it had been light, in one of the rooms he examined that he thought must have been over the living room, he would have been able to see into the room below.

In the attic he found nothing of any value whatever, though he examined it carefully and meticulously.

"Well, Peter Pomeroy, old chap, if you've hidden anything in this house, which I doubt, I think it must be downstairs—in the living room, maybe, or the kitchen." He remembered that he had yet to examine the dining room, kitchen, butler's pantry, and any

other rooms that were downstairs in addition to the living room. There must also be a cellar, he decided; would not a man bent on hiding treasure think naturally of the cellar? Val thought that it was possible.

Turning towards the stairs, he creakily made his way down to the foyer. What was that? He heard a sibilant hissing, a whisper on the stairs he had just descended.

He whirled swiftly, thinking he heard a noise of some kind above the beating of the storm. He strained his eyes into the darkness and could see nothing.

With a muttered imprecation at the jumpy state of his nerves, he groped his way through the dark hall in what he supposed was the general direction of the kitchen and dining room. He stopped suddenly again, thinking he heard a slight movement.

Holding the lantern high over his head, he examined as much of the place as he could, the moldy plaster around him, the dilapidated ceiling and the half falling stairs. Nothing. He went on.

Around the bend he went, into the darkest place he had seen yet, sheltered from all possible light by the overhanging stairs. A dark, swift figure moved, and then another.

His quick eye caught it. He put down the lantern and reached for his automatic, but he was not quick enough. Two figures hurled themselves on him. His right arm shot out in a short jolt, and caught the first assailant under the ear, flinging him down hard on the creaking floor half a dozen feet away.

A great figure loomed in front of him now. Even in the darkness he could see who it was. There was no mistaking that menacing bulk.

"Oh, so it's you, Iggy!" he shot out.

"Yes, it's me, you—— ——!" cursed the handless one, grating and sinister.

With a shock that shook the narrow hall the two big men thudded together, and Val remembered a distinct surprise at the great strength of the man with no hands. He felt no alarm, however, because how could Teck have a weapon? He had no hands in which to hold it.

That being the case, he disregarded the flailing arms of the big fellow and reached for his throat. He saw the other's right arm come up suddenly, flicking up like the head of a rattlesnake, and he had no time to duck, even if he had wanted to.

It was a glancing blow on the head. That was all he knew. In front of him everything went black and silent, and he slumped down into a muscleless heap at Teck's feet.

. . . . . .

Val came out of it slowly. He saw a gleaming light, getting farther away, and now drawing closer. His head ached badly, and now the light began to come closer to him, and still closer, until finally it rested next to him, and he discovered it was the candle, lighted now, on the plain kitchen table in the living room, next to which he sat in the pine chair.

He tried to arise, and found that he could not. He was bound to the chair. For some moments he sat perfectly still, trying to piece together the happenings of the last few minutes. He found it difficult.

He remembered, of course, having put out his first assailant. He remembered recognizing Teck, and closing with him. He remembered the flick of the scoun-

drel's wrist towards him, and then he remembered no more. It was plain, therefore, that Teck's arm had found his mark.

Yet how could a man without hands knock him out? He puzzled about this for a little while, and then, his head aching, he had to give it up. For the matter of that, how could a man without hands beat out the brains of poor old Mat Masterson? He couldn't.

That was where Val ended in his thought about Teck. The man couldn't do it, of course. But he had done it.

Next to him the candle burned fitfully, almost going out, often, at the sudden draughts from the windows, lighting up the ceiling in quick light and extinguishing it in swift darkness as it leaped and fell. The rain increased in intensity, and there was the rolling and reverberating of distant thunder. Val glanced toward the door and saw that it was closed—locked probably. Though that was unnecessary, as the open window was before him, with neither pane nor sash.

The rain swirled into the room through the window viciously. Val could actually hear the intense silence that had settled down upon the house over the noise of the storm. The noise was external; inside it was still as the grave. He shuddered. He did not like to think about graves at this time and in this place. He cursed his stupidity again in not having had sense enough to bring Eddie Hughes along on this trip.

Perhaps Eddie, being alarmed at his absence, would follow along. That led to another train of thought. Eddie, too, might fall into the hands of the enemy, unawares. Given a moment to draw his gun, or room for a left hook, and Eddie would be able to take care

of himself—but would he be given that moment? Val doubted it, and he gave himself over to the task of attempting to loosen his bonds.

He was satisfied now that he had indeed been watched as he peered into Jessica's little house from the road. Of course he would have been watched. It was foolish to think that Teck would not have thought of that. A twinge went through his head, and he cursed Teck again, and promised himself an ample vengeance.

He could make no headway with the bonds. It was a clean, workmanlike job, and there was little chance of his being able to release himself. He would need some assistance. At his side the candle guttered and sputtered in its grease, and Val had that uneasy sense of another presence in the house with him. He could hardly define the feeling, but he felt certain there was someone there; he did now know how he knew, but he did not doubt the fact.

Was Teck, or his assistant, still in the house? That might be, though Val had not heard them. If not they, who could it be? Not Jessica, certainly. In this rain, and alone at this hour. Not, not Jessica.

Was it something human, then? After all, nobody had ever been able to prove that all supernatural visitations were false—actually did not exist. And this old house—there was something about it that savored of the other world, of the world beyond the grave. Its gaunt rooms and its isolated position, its resounding walls and floors, and its yawning, empty windows.

He could scarcely throw the feeling off, though he detested himself for it. Lower and lower the candle sputtered next to him. Higher and higher came the rumble of the storm. On the pine table, next to his

elbow, something splashed, softly, yet he heard it. He turned quickly and his breath went short.

It was a crimson spot of warm human blood.

As he looked, another drop fell next to it. He looked up, in a sudden panic, and saw that it was coming from the ceiling—a thin, dark trickle that turned red when it came into the compass of the candle light.

What was it up there; bleeding, dying, dripping through this old ceiling in the black night? There was another splash of a drop of blood and another.

Suddenly, with a wet sobbing splash, one of the drops struck the candle wick full, extinguishing it instantly, leaving the room and Val in a black, velvet darkness. For an instant or two,—or was it an eternity or two?—he sat there, immovable, his face pale.

There was a sudden, leaping flash of sheet lightning, illuminating the room to the last, farthest corner for a brief instant. At the window toward which Val was looking, he saw something that made his blood run cold.

Framed in the window, a figure from the old world, was the upper part of a man. Although the time of seeing the apparition was only an instant, Val could remember every detail, so plainly did he see it. The figure was dressed in the frock coat affected by the old Virginia planters and gentlemen, and his face was shaded by a large soft hat. His face was pasty, old, with a white goatee and mustache, and the eyes were unutterably mournful and aged, dark windows that looked upon the world in sorrowful aloofness. Every line on the figure's face was plain to Val in the fraction of a second in which he glimpsed it, standing there at the window.

In a part of a second he was in black night again, enveloped in it as though he were in bed with his head under the stifling covers. He could not put his hands up to feel of it, but he would not have been surprised to know that his hair was standing on end. He could feel his skin, all prickly, as though a cold blast had struck him.

Then there was a peal of thunder that shook the old house to its very foundations, and as silence succeeded that overwhelming noise, the scream of a woman, wild and shrill, cut through the night like a rapier blade, from somewhere inside the house.

It was a distorted cry drawn from the soul, the cry of a being in terror, in deadly fear.

XXVII

THE UNKNOWN PRESENCE

The first emotion that swept over Val was one of unreasonable, incontrollable fear. It was the fear of the unknown, an emotion that overwhelms the senses not under the direction of the brain. Why the vision of the mysterious man at the window should so have affected him Val could scarcely have told; instinctively, however, Val had felt that this was not a being of any word he knew—rather was it something that returned to walk the earth at night when storms raged and the elements lashed the earth in fury.

Yet the figure, even in that brief glance, had seemed flesh and blood enough. There was something in that face that reminded Val of something—of something he had known, or had seen. He could not place the memory anywhere, at present, but even in the wave of fear that covered him momentarily he thought of it, and now that the apparition was gone it occurred to his mind insistently. Who was this old man, and what did he want here?

The storm shattered its waves resonantly, thunderously, upon the empty shell that resembled a house. The room was now as black as something the other side of the eternal pit; strain his eyes as he would Val could make out nothing except the dim rectangle that he knew was the window. What was the meaning

of the blood that dripped down upon him, through the ceiling? A slight shudder passed through him, and he told himself that he was chilly; but it was hardly the night air that caused that shudder.

Was a man dying over his head? Was he already dead? A human being was up there, his life fluid ebbing away, and Val could do nothing to help. He struggled blindly, furiously, with his bonds, and though he gained no material advantage, yet he profited by it, when once he had stopped his struggles, panting. It had steadied his mind and driven away this mysterious fear that had possessed his soul, that had entered into him regardless of the dictates of his reason. He felt more himself.

And that shriek? Who was that? Could it have been Jessica? He did not know—a feminine shriek, especially one such as he had heard, such as had congealed his blood momentarily, is sometimes a quite indistinguishable thing; it is a disembodied thing, knowing neither age nor color; it is simply the incarnation of terror, verbal and articulate.

There was still Teck to reckon with, Val thought. Teck and his man surely would be here soon; they had bound him, and for one purpose or another they were certain to return. He wondered, almost impersonally, whether Teck would put him out of the way permanently this time. He rather inclined to the idea that Teck would not; but then, it was not a thing anyone could be sure about. Not that Teck would hesitate at murder! Especially here, where he could do almost anything he cared to do, with no one any the wiser. But he had the feeling that the handless one was not yet ready to put an end to his existence summarily.

There was always Jessica for Val to think about, in these moments. He wondered where she was, and whether she was in the power of Teck. He gave himself little concern about that—as to whether she was in his power—because he did not believe for an instant that Teck would willingly cause any harm to come to her. But he was aware, by now, that this sinister fellow had an uncanny influence over the girl; that he could cause her to do things against all her nature and judgment; he was afraid that, sometime, Teck would actually induce her to marry him. That, he felt certain, was what the argument had been about this night, when they had so stubbornly faced each other in the cottage.

He paused for a moment in his meditations and glanced around hastily. The room was as black as ever, and he could make out nothing, but it seemed to him, for an instant, that he had heard a movement in the room; not a solid, concrete movement, something of the flesh, of humankind—this was a different kind of movement, like the sobbing of the wind through a midnight forest, or the intangible, nebulous movement light as the moonlight; of a graveyard Thing crossing a tombstone.

He could see nothing, but he could feel a Presence in the room; behind him, on the sides, shrinking in the lee of the lowering walls, moving, peering at him from all sides. He gave an involuntary shudder, and tried to laugh it off, but it would not down. Something was in the room with him. Outside the rain fell soddenly, in solid sheets, beating on the dull earth regularly, dripping off the eaves, pounding on the reverberant roof. Val shifted uneasily in his seat, and tried to pierce the darkness.

"Who is there?" he asked suddenly, loudly; over the beat of the elements.

There was no answer, but the next instant his every sense was on the alert, the gooseflesh prickling on his skin. As he turned back to the front of the room, he could have sworn that a shadow had slipped from one side of the room to the other—across the lightened gloom of the window. It was no more than a shadow, and made no more noise than one in its passage—but it was something that he had seen, he was sure of that. There *was* something in the room with him.

"Who's that?" he asked again, staccato.

As before, the beat of the rain was his only answer.

Suddenly, he felt that this Presence was standing behind his chair; he twisted in his seat to try to make it out. There was a twicking at his bonds, light as the sunlight on the tops of trees, and he felt the cords loosen. There was another lithe motion, and he felt a sharp bladed knife glide through the cords that held his hands fast.

Stiff, he tried to rise, and found that he could. The cords fell off him, and he was a free man. He whirled from one side of the room to the other in the endeavor to make out who or what it was that had freed him, but could see nothing. A cold gust of wind, coming from an unexpected angle, blew on him, and he saw, dimly, that the door was open. It had been closed before.

"That's how he—or It—got out," he told himself, grimly. "Well, whoever you are, thanks awfully."

His first act was to feel in his pocket for his tiny, powerful electric flashlight. He sighed with relief when he found it, because one needed light here rather badly at times. He must get out of this room, he decided.

Teck and his confederate knew he was in this room—having placed him there—therefore he must be gone when they returned.

He felt his way to the door and out into the little entrance room, which he ascertained was also empty. It seemed plain to him that Teck and his man had left the place—temporarily, at any rate. But there was something upstairs that must be looked at; something lying on the floor, bleeding, perhaps dead—almost certainly dead. Val could not go away and leave that lying there; a fellow human, perhaps needing assistance. He believed he knew how to find his way to the room—he had noted the room when he had been up there, directly above the living room, where he had been bound.

A room with thin floors, with great cracks between the boards, so that in the day time one could probably look down into the living room. Val could imagine a burning, intense eye staring eternally through the crack into the room below.

He made his way silently upstairs, not making use of his flash for fear of divulging his whereabouts. Quietly he moved, and so carefully, feeling each step before he put his weight down upon it, that it took him quite five minutes before he reached the top of the stairway. He paused at the door of the room above the living room—paused, and touched his hand lightly to the automatic in his pocket—which they had neglected, strangely, to take away from him. For bandits, it occurred to Val, Teck and his playmates were as careless as they could well be. Now, if he were banditting. . . .

He touched the knob of the half falling door, and entered the dark room. At first he could see nothing. Cautiously, he allowed the beam from his flashlight to

play on the floor, around the walls; he discovered nothing. He turned it on the center of the floor—where he had been almost afraid to train it.

"Who'n'ell's there!" grated an exasperated voice at him, and a warm glow of thanksgiving came over Val. He was no more alone—and the man who was dripping blood was evidently alive.

"Hello, Eddie," he chirped. "I'm not keeping you up, I hope."

He trained the flashlight on the floor, where the figure of Eddie Hughes was staggering, a bit unsteadily, to its feet. With a quick movement he was at Eddie's side, assisting him.

"No—I've had my beauty sleep, sir," replied Eddie.

Val turned the light on his face. He was a ghastly figure, with his face streaked with blood from a deep, ugly gash over his right eye. Evidently he had fallen immediately over a large crack in the floor, and it was this freely flowing blood that had put out Val's flickering candle. The blood was clotted now, though he must have lost rather more of it than a man can conveniently spare.

"Hurt much, Eddie?" inquired his employer.

"No, I'm all right now," said Eddie. "Knocked me for a gool, for awhile, though. Dunno how long I've been lyin' there, dead to the world. Never had a chance to take a wallop at 'im——"

"At whom?" inquired Val.

"That guy without no hands. I——"

"How do you get into this, anyway?" asked Val. "I thought you were at the pictures——"

"Oh, them pitchers! I sorta changed my mind. I came along to the little house an' I seen how things was, so I guessed you had gone down here—so nat-

urally I strung along. I sneaked into the house, quiet like, an' tried to get into the room downstairs. It was locked, so, after I give the once over to the other rooms downstairs, I came up here, where they jumped me. I got a flash of old boy Teck swinging for me, but I didn't worry none about it, because that bird's got no hands, so how could he hurt me? That's all I know, sir," he finished simply.

"Look's like a glancing gash you got," remarked Val. "Guess it's lucky it didn't catch you full; I suppose he thinks you're dead."

"Well, I don't feel so darn strong, sir," câme back Eddie. "I suppose I musta lost a quart of claret. I think a drink'll fix me up all right, though. What's the next move?"

Val considered a moment. "I don't know," he confessed. "What do you think?"

"Well, there's only one thing for it," replied Eddie. "It seems to me we ought to beat it back to Miss Pomeroy's house—I have a hunch that big yegg's there; we'll corner him there an' give him what for." This sounded reasonable.

"He has been running around loose rather too long, hasn't he?" said Val. "I think you're right."

"Let's go, then. But lissen, boss—he belongs to me," insisted Eddie.

"Nonsense," said Val. "He belongs to the Law—and that's where he's going. He's interfered with us just once too often. I didn't want to do that, but——"

"But you don't have to do it, Mr. Morley," protested his man. "Just hand the big bum over to me—an' the law'll never see him."

"Your ethics are all wrong, Eddie," Val put in.

"What do you want to do—slug him? You can't slug a man with no hands—a defenseless human——"

"Defenseless me eye!" burst in Eddie. "How do you get that way? Beggin' your pardon, sir. But if he's defenseless, I'm in me cradle listenin' to me mother jazzin' about the treetops an' the cradle rocking, an' all. Defenseless—say, I guess you wouldn't think so if he'd cracked you one on the bean like he did me——" Eddie's language, careful in his calmer moments, was decidedly slipshod and slangy when he was moved.

"He did, Eddie," broke in Val, soberly. "I wonder what he carries there——"

"Whatever it is, it's a world beater—that's all I got to say," said Eddie. "Gee! That crack he give me was enough to make my whole family sick."

Silently they made their way out of the house, seeing and hearing no one; evidently the place was deserted once more, left to its long sleep as before, "one with the darkness and the powers thereof," as Val repeated to himself, half audibly.

A few handfuls of rainwater sufficed to wash the blood off Eddie's face, and, bound up with his employer's handkerchief over his right eye, he was once more ready for whatever the night should bring forth. By the time they reached Jessica's little cottage the rain had got in its work well, and they were soaked, with their clothes clinging to their limbs affectionately and moisture dripping from every seam.

A broad beam of light emanated from the living room window, cutting a few feet into the night with its golden glow and leaving the rest of outdoors blacker by contrast. Val knocked on the door. After a moment it was opened by Jessica herself.

In silence she preceded them into the living room,

where Val and Eddie stood, two dripping figures, curiously out of place in the secure comfort of the small room.

"Is Teck here?" asked Val. He looked at her for a reply, but she stood singularly silent, a new, a different Jessica Pomeroy than he had known.

There was a subtle change in her, and as he looked again he saw that the change was not too subtle; he could sense it easily. The atmosphere was different, somehow; her attitude toward him was different. He could see a peculiar tenseness about her demeanor, about the corners of her eyes, for instance, out of which she regarded him quietly.

"Why do you ask?" she inquired calmly.

It was now his turn to stare at her, in inquiry. "Why do I ask?" he echoed.

"Yes—what is Mr. Teck to you?" she asked again, intoning monotonously, as though repeating a lesson that had been drilled into her by constant iteration.

Val looked at her unbelievingly; was this the Jessica Pomeroy he knew? The Jessica Pomeroy who had made an appointment to explore the old house with him this night? She was different, and he could scarcely say how, though her attitude was plain enough now—it was no longer friendly; it was almost openly hostile. But it was not that he was thinking of—external differences were easy to detect; but something inside of her had gone wrong, he could see that; some fuse burned out; some fine wire of determination severed.

"What's wrong, Jessica?" he asked, stepping up a bit closer to her impulsively. "You're so changed from——"

She stepped away from him, two spots of color flaring in her pale cheeks.

"I never gave you permission to call me Jessica, Mr. Morley," she said. "And as for anything being wrong——"

"Why, this Teck——" he began.

"I am engaged to marry Mr. Teck," she flashed back at him. "Really, I hardly see why you take it upon yourself to thrust your personal interference upon us in this matter. I told you at our first conversation that I was engaged to marry him——"

"Why, Jessica!" burst out Val, puzzled, and a little angry. "You said——"

"Never mind what I said, Mr. Morley," she cut in calmly, monotonously. "You will confer a great favor upon me if you will go back to New York, and forget all that has gone before."

"But surely, Jessica," he protested, "you cannot marry this murderer! Why, he has twice tried to kill me, and——"

"Your opinions in the matter will hardly convince me, Mr. Morley, that there is any truth in what you say. Will you be good enough to do as I ask you—go away, and not come back?" she asked it appealingly, a tremor in her otherwise emotionless voice.

He examined her silently for a moment or two before speaking, his brain pounding with the unexpected development in the affair. He did not for a moment believe in what she was saying—that she was acting a part he was well aware. How could the woman he loved be so cold and indifferent to him! Why, she simply couldn't—she was . . .

"Surely you're joking, Jessica," he exclaimed. "Why, you know, for a minute I thought you meant it——"

"I'm not joking, Mr. Morley. I mean every word I

say. If you're a gentleman, you'll do as I ask." She moved toward the door, an unmistakable sign that the interview was at an end. There was nothing for Val to do but bow and take his leave in silence, which he did, his head whirling dizzily from the suddenness of the let-down.

Without a word Val and Eddie walked around the house to the road where their car was cached. The rain had eased up a little now, and it was warmer, though Val did not notice these elemental changes in the least degree. It was a shock to the tense nerves of both of them when a small feminine figure suddenly stepped out in front of them from the shadows that lined the bushes at the side of the road.

"Mr. Morley!" she said in a whisper.

"Hello! What's all this?" muttered Val to himself. He and Eddie stopped dead in their tracks.

"It's me—Elizabeth—Miss Pomeroy's servant," said the voice.

"Oh, yes. What is it, Elizabeth?" Val asked kindly.

"Why, it's about Miss Jessica," said the old woman. "I—I heard what she was saying to you. You mustn't mind what she says, Mr. Morley. I—know her true feelings in the matter—anything she said to you tonight is not herself speaking. It's that devil Teck—he can make her say and do things she would never think of doing. He's a kind of hypnotist—can make her say anything he likes by just looking deep in her eyes; that's how she happened to come down here, you know," the old woman hurried on in her recital.

"Down here?" queried Val.

"Yes. She wasn't going to come—but he looked into her eyes and said she'd have to come—and here she is—that handless hypocrite! He told her what to say to

you to-night—he's still there, him and his friend—they're in the kitchen, waiting for you to go. I just thought I'd tell you, because——"

"Thanks very much, Elizabeth," said Val kindly, a warm glow fanning itself to a flame in his heart again. "I won't forget. Now run along back to the house before they miss you." She made a little curtsey and merged again with the darkness.

So his suspicions had been true. It was not Jessica who had spoken to him this evening—it had been Teck himself; Teck, speaking with the lips of Jessica Pomeroy. He would marry her, would he! Val grated this to himself, adding a few words that can scarcely be used in this highly moral story. He would marry the electric chair! Or better still, he, Val, would choke him with his bare hands. That would be satisfactory. He enlarged upon this idea by the time they reached the automobile; this was to be the real thing in chokings—none of your amateur affairs about it—satisfaction guaranteed, and all that sort of thing. Ah, it would feel good to get his fingers into the throat of the black-hearted scoundrel . . . et cetera . . . and so forth . . . ad lib . . .

It was a silent ride back to the hotel, with Eddie occupied wholly in making the rickety flivver keep to the road, and Val veiled in his thoughts. As for going home, as Jessica had suggested, he had not the slightest intention of doing any such foolish thing.

XXVIII

A JOB OF BURGLARY

At the hotel Val and Eddie called on the resident doctor and had Eddie's wound washed out and bandaged up properly. It was a nasty cut which had cleaned itself out thoroughly by the simple expedient of bleeding freely, and was no longer dangerous, though the doctor said that he thought it might leave a slight scar. Eddie said that he felt as good as new, and none the worse for his experience, though he looked rather desperate with his immense cross-shaped plaster covering his right eye and a large part of his forehead.

Once in their rooms, the men sat down to discuss the situation and to think out some solution, if possible.

Val lighted his pipe, sat down in a large easy chair, and gave himself up to reflection for a few minutes. Eddie sat in silence, too, smoking a vile smelling cigarette of pure Virginia tobacco.

"Well, what do you say, Eddie?" asked Val at length.

Eddie was still silent. It was almost as if he had not heard. He leaned comfortably back in his chair, and smoked luxuriously, relaxing every limb.

"Come, snap out of it, Eddie. This——"

"This here, now, Ignatz Teck——" began Eddie calmly.

"Ignace, Eddie," corrected Val. "Be precise."

"Well, Ignace, then, though I don't see as it's any

different. This here Teck bird must be removed, mustn't he?"

"Look's like it, Eddie. I had thought of handing him over to the police, but there are reasons why it might be inadvisable. In the first place, I don't want to drag Miss Pomeroy into it—and though she is absolutely innocent, of course, yet that won't prevent the papers smearing her name all over the story. In the second place, I am not certain that the police would be able to get anything on him. The only thing that might connect him with the murder of old Mat Masterson is——"

"The books," supplemented Eddie.

"Exactly. And what's to prevent him from getting rid of them at the first alarm——"

"Let's help him get rid of them," decided Eddie.

Val looked his inquiry. "You mean——"

"Sure thing. He must have them with him—seeing that they probably contain the dope about where this here money's stuck away; why—I bet they're in his room right now."

"Wouldn't be surprised," assented Val, nodding his head. "But I don't think he's been able to locate the money himself, yet—in fact, I'm sure he hasn't. The thing to do is to beat him to it." Eddie nodded.

"Have you any idea at all——"

"Not the slightest, Eddie. Suppose you were an old man, and you put some instructions in a book about where to find your fortune—what would you do?"

Eddie was quiet for a space. "I guess I'd mark the place, some way," he said at length, "so's I wouldn't forget."

Both lapsed into a brief silence again, and it was Val who broke it this time. "By Christmas, Eddie, I

think you've hit it! Ah, the perspicacity of the working classes! You think——"

"Well, I think a ten thousand dollar bill is a pretty decent sort of marker, boss," said Eddie, evenly. "If I was doing the marking, I think——"

"Elementary, Watson, elementary!" quoted Val, now thoroughly alive to the idea. "I remember exactly where that bill was—it was in the Bible, page two hundred. Deuteronomy. Maybe there's a passage that refers to it in this Bible—I know the exact chapter, because I read over a little of it at the time. Let's have it, Eddie."

Eddie handed him the copy of the Bible that lay on the little table beside the bed—"The Property of the Gideons"—there are hundreds of thousands of them scattered over this land, in almost every hotel room in the country, a familiar, black-backed Bible with the red-edged pages. Val read the section carefully, but could find nothing that looked like a clew to what he wanted. He read it over carefully again, and then shook his head as he put it down.

"Nix," he said. "Nothing doing."

"I didn't think you'd find anything there," said Eddie. "You'd have to look at the Bible he used. Might be——"

"Probably you're right, Eddie, if there's anything in this theory. A Bible's a pretty big book, and a man might make annotations in it that could easily be overlooked unless you knew just where to hunt for them. Then the only thing to do is to——"

"To lift the books out of Teck's room——"

"Again!" laughed Val. "Say, we could take a moving picture of those books, they've been doing so much traveling. But I think you have the right angle, Eddie,

at that. The best time to get those books would be right——"

"Right now," put in Eddie. "I don't think his nibs is back yet—that old girl said they were still in the house there. I don't think he'll be in any great hurry to leave, until he has to. It don't seem reasonable that he'd carry those books around with him, so I imagine they're still in his room."

"His room's right on this floor," said Val.

Eddie stepped to the French windows and threw them open, letting a flood of pure, sweet air into the room. The rain had ceased, and the stars had come out miraculously, studding the heavens above Chesapeake Bay with their glory.

The window opened on a long balcony, or sun-parlor, which ran the length of that side of the house.

"Right at the other end of this balcony," said Eddie, "is where this here handless wonder lives. If the window isn't open, I think I know where a cold chisel'll do the most good. We'll slip in, cop the books——"

"If he isn't home," interposed Val.

"And if he's home, so much the worse for him, that's all I gotta say," remarked Eddie. "Nobody can give me a wallop like this and get away with it as easy as that. Maybe there won't be nothing left for the police——"

"Now, Eddie. None of that stuff around. We'll be thrown out of the hotel, and it's the only decent one this side of Norfolk," laughed Val. "And anyway, that won't get us anywhere. Of course, if he starts any roughhouse, why, we can slip it to him, but I don't think he'll pull that stuff here. Get the chisel."

Eddie unbuttoned his coat; a large chisel stood in

his inside pocket, ready for duty. "I kinda thought that at the old house," he remarked, "we might need it, so I brung it along."

"You think of everything, Eddie," said Val. "Let's go."

XXIX

PRISONERS!

In the little cottage on the Pomeroy estate, two people faced each other across the table; Jessica dull, defeated, tense; Teck nonchalant, the light of victory in his greenish eyes, sprawling hugely on a chair, his stumps in his pockets, his characteristic attitude, a sneer curling his lips; hard and unyielding lips.

"Thank you," he was saying. "That should send this Morley cub about his business. I am in your debt." He was mockingly polite, the while he held her eyes with his. She, unable to wrench her gaze away, sat there looking into his burning orbs as though he were a serpent and she a bird; the light had burned out of her eyes now; she could only look at him, tired and surrendered.

"Don't be sarcastic, Ignace," she replied, and her voice was like her gaze, even, monotonous, dull, without a high light or a quiver in it. "I sent him away because you ordered me to. If there is nothing else to-night, you might go away——"

"There is nothing else to-night, Jessica," he said, and there was an attempt at softness in his tone, and a relaxing of the lines about his mouth. "But to-morrow——" he trailed off into silence, a pregnant significant silence.

"To-morrow?" she intoned. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you know?" he asked, and the mocking light slipped into his eyes again She shook her head qui-

etly as if she did not greatly care This man had possession of her, body and soul—or so it was, at the moment. What did it matter what to-morrow had to bring?

"To-morrow," he said slowly enunciating each word carefully, permitting it to sink in spacing out his words so that she could catch the full import of what he was saying. "To-morrow you are going with me to Norfolk. We will take out a marriage license in the morning. In the afternoon we will be——"

"No! No! Not that!" she burst out, galvanized for an instant into life, a fleeting instant that was gone almost as it came. "I cannot do that——"

"Yes, you can," he said, slowly, gazing full into her eyes. The color that had flamed up in her receded from her cheeks as quickly as it had come, leaving her listless, languid, and complaisant—his to order, his to do with whatever he willed.

"To-morrow you will do as I ask, Jessica," he said again, repeating the sentence once more, slowly.

"Yes, Ignace," she replied, in a whisper so low he could scarcely catch it. She was careless of what he asked again; it was of no consequence. Had he asked her to accompany him to a justice of the peace or a minister to-night, she would have done so unquestioningly now.

"Ah, exactly, my dear," he said. "I knew you would see it my way." He was courtly now, and attentive—the attitude fitting in a man towards the woman he is about to take to his bosom as wife.

"I'm tired, Ignace," she said unexpectedly. "I want to rest. Now that I have promised——"

"Of course, my dear," he replied to this. "Of course." He rose and faced to the door. "I'll go now.

To-morrow I'll be here early. And in the meantime——" he turned to her again and his voice grew hard, flinty, "In the meantime, don't try any nonsense. I've had just about all of that that I can stand from you—and from that Morley nuisance. I haven't been hard with you, because I always thought that eventually you would come to your senses about this matter—but my patience has its limits, Jessica, and I want to warn you that I intend to carry my program through regardless of what it costs. If persuasion won't work, why, there are other ways." His voice now purred softly, confidentially, like a cat's, with the same suggestion of sheathed claws and sharp, wicked teeth.

She succeeded, finally, in wrenching away her gaze. "Good night," she said quietly, evenly, not trusting herself to look full upon his face. He made as though to take her in his arms, but she evaded him with a heedless, natural movement that carried her beyond him; her cheeks now flamed with color, and had he looked closely he would have been able to see the fighting will that, dormant until now, was awakening in her depths.

"Good night," she said again.

"Good night," he replied, and turned toward the door.

At the door he paused once more. "And remember what I just told you—you know I don't joke about such things."

She regarded him in silence as he let himself out, but a surprising change came over her as the door closed upon him. Her form straightened out, new life came into her glorious eyes, and her breath came and went more rapidly. She was a different woman; she was purposeful and awake, vibrant with energy and life; a woman fighting for her own.

"Elizabeth," she called into the kitchen.

That old woman appeared at the door, her eyes tired, her figure sagging. "Has that old he-devil gone?" she asked. "I thought he'd never go. He——" She caught the expression on her mistress' face then.

"Why, Jessica, honey——" she exclaimed, going to her and stroking her hand, "what's the matter? What is it?" She saw fright in her mistress' face, fright, fear, mingled with determination, sudden, unchangeable resolve. "Why, Jessica——"

"I'm all right, Elizabeth. Tell Germinal to harness up the horse and get the trap ready. We're going to Norfolk—and back to New York to-night?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Germinal's gone," she said.

Jessica stared her astonishment. "Gone!" she said. "When, and where—why?"

"A few minutes ago—that crippled old fathead was in here, so I couldn't tell you. If a nigger can get pale, that's the way Germinal looked, the black old fool. He came running into the kitchen, nearly dead with fright—you could actually see him pale under that brown skin of his. He could scarcely talk—his tongue didn't seem to be able to work, somehow—frozen to the roof of his mouth. Finally, all I was able to get from him was that he had seen something, a ghost, I guess—he kept talking about how the grave gives up its dead——"

"The grave!" interjected Jessica.

"Yes. He said graveyards were yawning—his hair was actually standing on end. I do declare to goodness, I never saw a man so scared as that man Germinal. Said he wouldn't stay in this place another minute—he said it was full of 'hants' and that he just

saw a dead man disappear into the bushes. He hitched up his wagon and went to town lickety-split before I had a chance to argue with him or to find out what it was all about. The last I seen of him he was layin' the whip on good—you'd be surprised at all the speed he could get out of that old bundle of skin and bones that he used to say was a horse. I declare to goodness gracious I never in all my born days——"

"Gone!" said Jessica. "Just when I need him so badly, too. I wonder what it really is that people manage to see around here at night; I never saw anything; did you?" Elizabeth shook her head.

"But we must get back to Norfolk to-night, Elizabeth. I must get away from those eyes—those green eyes that look right into me; I'm not my own master when he's looking at me, Elizabeth—he could get me to do anything. He seems to project his own will into me, somehow; fills me up with himself; he takes possession of my senses, Elizabeth—Oh, Elizabeth, I'm afraid of him—afraid of what he'll make me do!" She was wild eyed in her momentary terror.

"There, there, honey!" Elizabeth soothed her. "It'll be all right—he won't make you do anything—just say the word and I'll empty a teakettle of boiling water on his head, and give him something really to worry about. I'll——"

"You don't understand, Elizabeth. The man's a demon—he will stop at nothing, and I'm powerless when those terrible eyes catch me like a fish on a hook. I must get away——"

"We'll walk, then," decided Elizabeth. "It's not so far, even if it is dark. Get your things, honey, and I'll get dressed, too. We won't stop for a suitcase. The rain's stopped, and we'd better get right along.

Hurry," she called after the girl, who was already on her way to her room to get her hat and coat. "We'll give that filthy beast something to think about—when he comes to-morrow and finds we've gone. Once back in New York and——" her voice was lost in the retreat to her room.

A few minutes later they extinguished the lamp in the living room and stepped out of the door, closing it carefully, and turning the key in the lock.

"Is there another boat to-night, I wonder," remarked Jessica anxiously. "It seems to me——"

"Not to-night, I think, Miss Jessica," replied the old woman, "the way I remember these boats. But I think we'll do better to go to Newport News for the night—stop in one of the hotels there—and take the early morning boat from the Point to Willoughby Spit —he'll never expect us to do that; in fact, he'll probably be on his way out here."

"I wonder where Mr. Morley is now," remarked the older woman irrelevantly.

"I wonder," came softly from Jessica. "I'd feel a whole lot safer if he was with us," she confessed. "Well, come on, Elizabeth," she said to the old woman, who had been lagging behind. "Let's go as quickly as we can."

They stepped out into the black road, lined with shrubbery, rutted and hard, in the early autumn night. Hardly had they gone ten yards when a figure stepped in front of them, appearing silently out of the black bushes like the veriest apparition.

"My goodness gracious!" exclaimed Elizabeth in a voice that was almost a shriek, so sudden had been the appearance of the figure. Jessica did not speak; she had been too frightened, momentarily. Her hand went

to her bosom, and she stood there, pale, and almost swaying from the fright and the shock.

"Just where does youse folks t'ink youse is goin', huh?" growled the apparition, which now turned out to be the young man who had accompanied Teck earlier in the evening.

"Why—why—we're—ah—we're going for a walk, though I don't see what business it is of yours——" began Jessica.

"Oh, youse is goin' fer er promenahd, huh?" mocked the young man. "Well, it is me bizness, an' don't let nobuddy tell yer diff'runt, see! Just promenahd yerselves back to de porch an' do yer walkin' on de porch. Dis here night air ain't none too healthy fer young female wimmen—nor fer no old hens, neither," he glared malevolently at Elizabeth, who glared back at him as though she would like to scratch his eyes out.

"Yer see, yer might git yer tootsies wet, walkin' so late," he explained. "Come on, now," he ordered, seeing that the women were about to remonstrate indignantly. "Don't gimme none er yer guff about it—I got me orders an' dey gits carried out, see! Me orders sez yer stays in dat dere house to-night, an' dat's where yer stays——" he stepped up to the women threateningly—"dat is, if yer don't want ter be knocked fer a can of Swedish sardines. Get me?"

There was a brief silence, with Jessica struggling hard to keep back the tears of rage and disappointment. This man Teck thought of everything. Being a trickster himself, he expected trickery in everybody —even in the woman he wanted to marry. And the maddening part about it was that he had been correct in his assumption—that he had outguessed her.

"Come on! Snap inta it, before I carries yer back to der house," he threatened.

Jessica and Elizabeth turned without a word, and made their way back to the house.

Jessica was dully conscious of her defeat. It was plain to her that she would not get away from that house this night—that she would be here in the morning, when Teck called for her. Her only hope was that Val would call first—Elizabeth told her that she had explained to Val, and that he would certainly not return to New York without first trying to see her. He would come in the morning—of that she was certain; but it was important that he come early; that he make his appearance before Teck came upon the scene. Otherwise it might be too late.

XXX

THE BOOKS AGAIN

Like two shadows, creatures of the night, Val and Eddie crept along the balcony of the hotel. With the exception of one or two rooms, that side of the house was in complete darkness. One room, far down towards the end of the balcony, was lighted, the yellow shaft of light cutting across the gloom of the black balcony sharply.

A cold breeze blew from Chesapeake Bay, and the men inwardly were grateful that they had thought to put on their hats. They could not tell how long they would have to stand outside the French windows of Teck's room, which was next to the lighted one, on the extreme end of the balcony. Far in the distance was the great arc light of Willoughby Spit, a tiny star in the tenebrous immensity that lay, like a somber cloak, over the bay. Over towards Hampton Roads were the riding lights of a couple of battleships, and a few electric lights gleamed over Fortress Monroe, leaving in black relief the motionless figure of a sentry who had stopped, momentarily, high up on one of the bastions of the twelve-inch guns.

"Two on and four off," murmured Eddie, noticing the sentinel. "Glad I'm off that stuff."

"S-s-sh'-h!" cautioned his employer, warningly.

At last they stopped outside the windows of Teck's room. All was dark inside. For a full minute they

paused there, at one side, so as not to present a target if by some chance the room was inhabited. They could hear nothing, though the window was slightly open and they would have been able to distinguish the sound of regular breathing had someone been sleeping within.

"O.K., I guess, Eddie," whispered Val.

"Yes, sir," replied Eddie, sibilantly. "Shall we go in, sir?"

Val nodded. Cautiously he pushed the window open and stepped in over the low sill. Eddie followed him. The room was still as the grave. It was not possible to see anything.

"Got the flash, sir?" inquired Eddie.

"Here it is," said Val, producing it, and pressing the button. "Oh, the devil!" he exclaimed in exasperation, as no beam of light rewarded his efforts.

"Hang it all!" he whispered. "The battery's dead."

"Wait a minute," said Eddie. "I'll pull down the shades, and we can switch on the lights. We'll be out of here in a moment, anyway, sir—long before old boy Teck ever gets back."

"Go ahead," consented Val. It seemed safe enough. Eddie pulled the shades down carefully, first closing the windows tightly. In an instant the room was flooded with a glare of electric light.

They looked around them cautiously, silently, though there seemed no particular need for silence. The books were not in evidence, but that was to be expected, of course.

"Here, let's try this suitcase," said Val. He opened it. It was full of clothing. He tried another. It was locked.

"Eddie, the chisel," he directed.

Eddie pried open the suitcase with his cold chisel,

utterly ruining the lock. They opened it on the bed, pouring out the books thereon. They crowded close, bending over the books.

"Here it is," announced Eddie triumphantly, producing the Bible, a small, compact book bound in the conventional black.

"Now I wonder——" he scratched his head contemplatively, laying his hat on the bed in order that the scratching process might be efficient. "I wonder what——"

The door of the adjoining room opened quietly, but not so quietly that they did not hear it. Both whirled on the instant, taken utterly by surprise. It had not occurred to either of them that Teck might have both rooms. It was so simple that they had just not thought of it.

Framed in the doorway were Horseface and Rat, automatic in hand, looking just as brutally dangerous, as efficient, as when Val had seen them last, in Teck's rooms on the East Side of New York.

"If yuh'll kindly stick up them dere fins a' yourn," suggested Horseface, "we won't have ter perforate yuh. An' be dam' quick. Git me!"

The hands of Val and Eddie went up slowly. It was a trap, and a simple one—one that they had absolutely overlooked. Val knew that these men were to meet Teck down here, in Virginia, but he had, somehow, forgotten the fact. Evidently they had followed on the next train.

"Dishere looks like boiglary ter me," suggested Rat, leering. "Breakin' open er sootcase an'——"

"I'll excuse you from the definition of burglary, Rat," broke in Val. "Both you and Horseface, I'll take it for granted, are well acquainted with exactly

what constitutes burglary. Not that burglary, in itself, is not one of the fine arts—far from that. Simply, at the moment, I don't think I care for any expert instruction——"

"Aw, close yer trap!" snapped Horseface, "before I lets dishere gat go off, carelesslike. Sit down dere on de bed, both a' yer, an' don't make no suspicious moves, neither; I'm a nervous guy, an' when I gits nervous I presses triggers."

Val and Eddie sat down as requested.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" inquired Val, politely; he appeared calm, even in good spirits, the while Eddie sat next to him raging inwardly at the childish stupidity of having been trapped so easily.

"We're just havin' a little visit wid yer, that's all," said the Rat. "We likes yer comp'ny, see! Us an' youse, we'll just have one a' dem dere feast a' reasons an' flow a' souls, dat's what. Chawmed t' meetcha, 'msure," he mocked, waving careless circles in the air with his ugly blue black automatic.

"I trust we're not keeping you awake?" inquired Val courteously. "Because if you'd care to go to sleep——"

"Naw, dat's a' ri'," said Rat. "We is just as li'ble ter put youse ter sleep, if it comes ter dat."

Val rose. "If it's all the same to you——"

"Sit down!" snapped Rat, his gun barrel becoming steady instantly.

Val sat down. "What do you intend to do about it?" asked Val. Next to him sat Eddie, his eyes black and hard, his mouth a single straight line. He was almost burning up with rage.

"About wot?" queried Horseface. "Youse? Oh, dat's a' ri', kid," he assured him. "De boss'll be here

in a few minits; he'll tell us. Dis time, if ya gits bumped off, ya'll git bumped off permanent. Git me? Me, I gotta wallop on de bean dat I won't fergit in a hurry—an' youse has ter pay fer dat. In de meantime, don't make no move if yer don't want ter pay fer it right erway, dassall I gotta say."

They sat in utter silence for awhile, Horseface and Rat with their deadly looking weapons in their hands, Val chipper and contented, and Eddie disconsolate and plainly angry. It was Val who broke the silence at last, irrepressible.

"You people should go into business—just imagine your sign," he chattered. "Plain and fancy assassination done here. Victims called for and delivered. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back!' There should be big money in it, Horseface. There must be lots of people who really deserve killing——"

The door opened and Teck entered, taking in the situation at a glance.

"Good evening," he said courteously. "Still engaged in—er—breaking and entering, I see," he remarked. "Well, well. It's a bad habit that you really ought to break yourself of, Mr. Morley. If you had had the proper upbringing——"

"Well, we're not all gifted in the same direction, Iggy," came back Val. "Some can commit burglary successfully, by instinct, like some who shall here be nameless——" he looked at him significantly, "and some have to study very hard before they master the knack of it. We really ought to study at your feet—Maestro!"

Teck shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "Well, it wouldn't do you much harm—your technique is all wrong, anyway. You know, Morley, one of these

days you're really going to get hurt—I'll begin to play with you for keeps; you won't have a marble left by the time I get done with you, if I ever start that."

Val laughed. "You know, Iggy," he said, "you're the most refreshing blackguard it has ever been my good fortune to meet. Really, outside of musical comedy, I never would have believed you existed."

Teck bowed as though pleased. "You honor me, my friend. We strive to please. But this is not musical comedy—the villain wins, Morley." His face hardened, and the fun went out of it. He was business again—a scoundrel engaged in his profession. The scar that slashed across his countenance throbbed and grew livid.

"All I have to do," he said, "is to call the office on the phone and explain to them that I found you two in my room, rifling my suitcases——"

Val laughed loudly. "Swell chance!" he exclaimed. "I have a life-sized picture of you explaining that to the hotel detective—giving him the books as Exhibit A, say!" He paused and looked at the books with meaning.

"Honest, Teck," he said, "do you expect me to swallow that?"

Teck was angry. "Then how about shooting you and your—er—your friend down, caught in the act of burglarizing my room?" he asked grimly. "They don't have to see the books——"

"I don't think you will, Iggy," remarked Val lightly. "You see, you're in no position to bear investigation just at present. In fact, I think we'll go, Eddie," he said to the man seated beside him. "This man can't stop us."

"All right, sir," said Eddie, putting on his hat with care and deliberation, and standing up.

"I was just about to suggest it," came from Teck, amazingly. He stood in the center of the room, his hands characteristically in his pockets, lounging nonchalantly in front of them. "Understand me, Morley—if I had any particular reason for detaining you, you would stay just as long as I wish you to stay—but you're out of this game for good, anyway—and if you'll take a little friendly advice, you'll leave for the North the first thing in the morning."

"I'm out of the game for good!" echoed Val. "Why, how did you get any such fool idea?" He stared at him in wonderment.

The other gave him back look for look, and for a moment neither spoke in words, but there was much that lay between them that was said in their eyes, in the lines around their mouths, and in their attitudes. It was Teck who spoke first.

"Miss Pomeroy has finally sent you away. You told me yourself that you would be here until she sent you away—and she has done so. That should be sufficient——"

"It would be sufficient, Iggy," came back Val, and his voice was flinty. "It would be sufficient—if she had. But it was not she who sent me away—it was you. It was you, speaking with her lips——"

Teck interrupted him with a laugh of mirth. "Oh, my Lord!" he said in evident enjoyment. "The kindergarten class in mesmerism will please stand up! Is that your regular line of nonsense, Morley—or do you reserve it for special occasions, like this?"

"Laugh if you like, Iggy—but you won't be laughing long. I'm in this game for keeps—and if I go it

will be feet first. You can tell that to Horseface and Rat, here, if you want to—because I'm going now, unless you or they care to stop me."

He turned with Eddie to the window and threw it open.

"Whaddya say, boss?" queried Rat. "Do we give 'im de woiks—or does de boob git away wit' it onct more?" He punctuated his remarks with his automatic, the while Val turned insolently, poised in the sill.

"Tell him to shoot—if you dare, Iggy," he said lightly.

The eyes of the two men met and held; it was Teck who turned his gaze away first.

"All right, Eddie," said Val, and turned to Teck for a last parting shot. "And Iggy—stay away from the Pomeroy place—that's my last word to you." His expression was without emotion, but his intonation was stony.

Ignace Teck said nothing. They went through the window, and closed it carefully behind them.

XXXI

THE SECRET IN THE BOOKS

Back in their rooms, Val and Eddie sat down to talk it over. The lightness had, momentarily, dropped from him as one drops a cape from his shoulders, and he was conscious, again, of defeat. He had had the book in his hands—and had lost it again. He felt sure that the secret was in the Bible; not that the money meant anything to him, but the achievement of his purpose meant a great deal.

Suddenly, he was irritated with the whole business; with the Hotel Chamberlin, the Pomeroy property, himself, the money, Eddie. He gave voice to his irritation audibly.

"For heaven's sake, Eddie—don't you know enough to take off your hat in the house?" he asked harshly. "That lid—why do men wear derbies, anyway?" He looked at the offending hat irritably.

"Yes, sir," replied Eddie. "There are lots of reasons for wearing derbies, sir," he said. "Of course, begging your pardon and meaning no disrespect, the primary reason is to cover the bean, if I may say so. That being the case, you would naturally remark that it could be done without so much waste space. But——"

"Are you trying to kid me, Eddie?" demanded Val. "Because, if you are——"

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Eddie. "How can you think such a thing—as though I would be so disrespectful!

What I meant to say when you interrupted me, was that sometimes even the wasted space in a derby hat could be utilized to advantage."

He took off the hat, and took a small, thick, black bound book out of it.

It was the Bible they had gone after.

Open-mouthed, astonished, Val stared; for a little while he was almost speechless. Finally he found voice, the while he contemplated Eddie, who sat there, holding the Bible in his hand and gazing at it admiringly.

"For the lova Mike, Eddie!" he gasped. "How did you ever manage to do that—I never saw you pulling it."

"Neither did they, sir," said Eddie, respectfully. "It's a sorta heavy Bible, sir," he added reflectively. "Now, in a silk hat, there would'a been more room——"

"You'd have taken away the suitcase in the silk hat, I guess," said Val, his good temper restored marvelously. "I must admit that you've certainly earned your salary to-night," he said. "Any man who can actually find a real use for a derby hat has my respect. Let's have that Good Book, and we'll see what we can see." He took the book from his man's outstretched hand.

"Better pull the blinds down, I guess, sir," said Eddie, and he did so. "Never can tell what that there handless prodigy will be up to."

On page two hundred Val found the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh chapters of Deuteronomy, in part. He read carefully for awhile, but could see nothing that was of significance.

"Moses seems to have a great deal to say here," commented Val, "but he doesn't seem to say anything

about Peter Pomeroy. Can it be he didn't know the old gent?"

He returned to his reading of the text. He had an idea that perhaps mad old Peter Pomeroy had used a part of the text to indicate the hiding place of his money—but how had he used it? That was the point at which Val had to confess himself stumped.

That, he reflected, was one of the places he considered himself stumped. There were others. In the rush of events this night, he had had no time to think about his strange liberation in the old house on the Pomeroy grounds. Who was it who had cut him loose from his bonds? What ghostly fingers were those that had wielded the knife?

Even now, in the light of his own room, with Eddie sitting opposite him, he shivered involuntarily when he thought of it. Like the figure of a dream it was—the shadow that had been his benefactor there. And yet, who was it? The question recurred again and again. Flesh and blood it was, of course—it was a sure enough knife that had done the cutting; he had felt the concrete, fleshly touch of the liberator.

There was someone prowling around the old estate that none of them knew of, he inclined. Someone who, knew his way about, too; with the lightness, softness of a cat, with the ability to blend with the eccentric, ghostly shadows that filled the old place. Someone who did not like Teck, it would appear, else why should he go to the trouble to cut loose his enemy?

That there was someone there who would in the end have to be reckoned with, Val was sure. He did not think that the Unknown had made its last appearance in this matter. He felt that there would be a time when he would be face to face with the Mystery

again—and when the Mystery—he called him that mentally—would speak to him. Was he the strange apparition who had appeared to him out of a stroke of lightning—who had been revealed to him in an instant, and blotted out in the same instant? Who or what was this thing?

Val could feel again the touch of those invisible fingers as he was released, the creepy feeling that there was more about him than he could see with his eyes or hear with his ears.

With a puzzled sigh he went back to his perusal of the Bible. He read carefully, slowly, noting every word and every letter, and having finished with the two pages—two hundred and two hundred and one—between which the large bill had lain, he started once more, deliberately.

He had attained halfway down the page when he leaned forward with excitement, his eyes bright with the discovery. He saw what he had not seen before—marks—pencil marks, so slight, so slender and light, that it required strong eyes to behold them. He read the passage:

> And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee.

In this passage the slight mark appeared under the words: *Go* and *unto*. It was plainly the beginning of a message! He glanced further. Now that he knew they were there, he could see more underscorings on the page. It was a message from the dead.

"Got it, Eddie!" he exclaimed. "Get a pencil and paper, and take it down as I give it to you."

Eddie took out a notebook and wrote down what he was told, sitting there in silence, not disturbing his employer by so much as an unnecessary movement.

"Put down 'Go unto,' Eddie," said Val.

Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in Mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister.

Mount was underscored—the only word in the passage underscored. Through the succeeding passages Val spelled out the word—*Monroe;* the letters of this were spelled out in sequence from different words in the text.

"Mount Monroe," dictated Val. "Got that—Go unto Mount Monroe?"

"Yes, sir," said Eddie. The rest of the message was short, spelled out through the chapter in the same way, letter by letter.

It read, in full:

"Go unto Mount Monroe, to the secret cave known only to Jessica, my daughter. To her, my sole relative and heir, is left all that is there contained.

PETER J. POMEROY.

Val leaned back in blissful contemplation of this. So there really was treasure. Doubloons, pieces of eight, Spanish gold! It was more or less like a novel of adventure, he told himself. He had never been in this on account of the money. As a matter of fact, he had doubted gravely that there really was any money hidden, buried, or wherever it was that people put money away, if they did not put it in banks.

And now it had come true, miraculously, like a fairy

story; like a tale that is told. It gave a sharp zest to life, this thing. To go hunting for buried treasure, and to find that, somewhere, there is treasure really buried! His blood had not so raced through his veins since the first time he had raptly read through the pages of Stevenson's epic of buried treasure and villainy and bloodcurdling adventure.

"So there really is something in it, Eddie," he exclaimed.

"It seems so, sir," answered Eddie. " Where is this here Mount Monroe, anyway?"

"I guess Miss Pomeroy'll know. Secret caves on mountains! It was almost too good to be true. And he had uncovered it himself—that would weigh with Jessica, he considered. Perhaps . . .

He allowed himself to sink away into a reverie about the girl with hidden lights in the coils of her hair. There was that dream he had had about a wedding. . . . Now, it was not impossible for such a dream to come true. Men have married women before . . . he considered. . . . Not such women as Jessica, of course, but it was possible that to them the women had seemed just as wonderful. That was absurd, of course . . . as if any woman could be as wonderful as Jessica; yet men were foolish, and they had their dreams.

"To-morrow morning, Eddie," he said, "we start out early—at daybreak. We'll get Miss Pomeroy to go with us—the note says she knows where the cave is—and we'll have the loot before old boy Iggy is out of bed. Then back to New York—maybe."

"Yes, sir," said Eddie. "After breakfast, sir," he supplied.

Val laughed. "This is no time to think of food, Eddie. Haven't you any soul for romance?"

"Yes, sir," said Eddie. "This here romance thing is more romantic on a full stomach, though."

"Well, go to bed, Eddie. I'm going to turn in."

Eddie went into his room and prepared for the night. Val made his preparations quickly, threw open the window full, and turned out his light. There was a table near the window, and on it he threw the Bible which he had abstracted from Teck's room.

"Good night, Eddie," he called.

"Good night, sir," came a sleepy voice.

The room was bathed in darkness and in sleep; the slumberous shadows were deep except near the window, where a wan moon somewhat lightened the gloom with a thin, cold, silvery light.

From far off, across the bay, came the bell of a vessel, to be answered by other bells, mellowed by their passage over the water. Here and there on the water the great searchlight of Fortress Monroe played unceasingly, vigilantly, and somewhere below, far on the road, an automobile chugged noisily on its way.

Outside Val's window two shadows halted—a large bulk, on whose handless stumps the moon played, shrouding them in a ghastly light, and another, smaller, who held in his hand a flashlight.

"There it is—on the table," whispered a hoarse voice, when Teck had got accustomed to the darkness. The table stood by the window, bathed in the light of the moon, and was easily discernible.

The smaller man reached in and seized the book. Outside, on the balcony, he played his flashlight on the cover.

"That's it," hissed the voice of Teck.

They were gone.

It was almost like a nightmare. Val sat up in bed and called to Eddie.

"Asleep, Eddie?" he asked.

"What is it, sir?" came back a sleepy voice.

"The Bible—it's stolen again," said Val.

There was a scuffle—Eddie leaping out of bed. "It would be, sir," he said, coming into the room. "Shall I go and get it? That book has traveled more——"

"No, don't bother, Eddie. Let them have it," replied Val. "I'm too tired to bother about it."

"I know, sir," remonstrated Eddie, awake now. "But the dope about the money—they might uncover that——"

"I think not, Eddie," yawned Val sleepily. He reached under his pillow.

"You see," he said, "I rather expected a visit some time to-night. He won't be suspicious if he has the Bible—and I don't mind." He handed Eddie a sheet of paper he had produced from under his pillow. It was the page of the Bible containing the data indicated by Peter Pomeroy, neatly cut out.

"Good night, sir," said Eddie.

XXXII

NIGHT ALARMS

They were not destined, however, to finish out the night with sleep. There are some nights, sometimes, into which Fate seems anxious to crowd in the experience of a lifetime, as though there would never be any more nights for her to play with. This night was already badly jammed with events, but they were not yet through, though the next act of destiny was not directly involved with Val's affairs. Fate was not yet finished. She still had a trump card up her sleeve to play, and she played said card just before the dawn, when the night was blackest and when men slept the soundest.

Val was awakened by a fit of coughing. He opened his eyes slowly, sleepily, and though his window was open it seemed to him that the atmosphere was stifling; that it was almost impossible for him to breathe. There was a pungent, acrid element in the atmosphere; something he was unaccustomed to; something that his tortured lungs rejected. From afar, through his semi-conscious state, he heard a sound of crackling. In the next room he caught the creaking of the springs of the bed as Eddie turned from side to side, in his sleep, evidently also endeavoring to breathe.

Suddenly, instantly, however, he was awake—awake to the fullest extent. Through the great corridors outside, ringing up and down the wooden walls, came the dread cry that sometimes comes in the night.

"Fire!"

Fire! The one element of which all animals are instinctively afraid—the element man has harnessed to his own use, and which, sometimes escaping from the bonds, turns on man with deadly, vicious effect.

Fire!

The sound shrieked through the corridors again, and was taken up here and there in different parts of the great hotel. Val was on his feet in an instant, switching on the lights with almost the same motion. From the next room came Eddie, dragging with him his trousers, a sleepy figure in pink silk pajamas and scarcely opened eyes. The room was full of smoke, and it was hard to breathe—getting harder every moment.

Val opened his door, and shut it instantly. The corridor was thick with rolling billows of choking smoke, and in the distance, at the end, he saw the dull red of flames leaping the height of the hall.

"Eddie, let's go!" gasped Val. "This old rattletrap of a hotel'll go up like tinder—I know this place. No chance."

"Right, sir!" Eddie shouted back at him.

The men jumped for their suitcases, and shoveled their belongings, as many of them as they could reach, hastily into the leather receptacles. There was not a moment to be lost. The smoke was now rolling into the room, through the skylight and through the cracks around the door. The men could hardly breathe.

"By the window, Eddie!" commanded Val. He knew there was no chance through the halls, which must by now be an inferno of fire and smoke. They were only one flight up, and it would be no difficult thing to slide down one of the pillars.

"All right, sir," said Eddie.

Val jumped for the window and started to go. "Come on," he shouted over his shoulder. He heard no answering footsteps, and looked back.

Eddie was struggling mightily to get into his trousers.

"Come on, Eddie!" he shouted again. "There's no time for that."

"I won't go out without my pants," shouted Eddie obstinately, struggling still harder to persuade the refractory garment to envelop his nether extremities. In his excitement he had them turned around wrong, and another few precious seconds were wasted in turning them around.

"Damn your respectability, Eddie!" shouted Val, knowing that in another instant the flames would be leaping into the room. By that time Eddie was inside his beloved pants. The red flames were already showing over the transom and licking in around the edges of the door.

The men hurried out on the balcony. Eddie carefully threw the suitcases over. "All right, chief," he said, and motioned to the pillar.

Val dropped over the balcony, wrapped his legs around the smooth column, and slid down, acquiring thereby three splinters in inconvenient places. In an instant Eddie was standing beside him on the ground. Their automobile was still standing at the curb, where Val had placed it when he returned from the Pomeroy place. Eddie deposited the suitcases therein and cranked the machine up quickly. He drove it to a spot a hundred yards farther on, out of the line of danger.

In the meantime Val, in bathrobe and slippers, ran around to the front entrance to see whether there was anything he could do, any assistance he could give.

From all sides came guests, scantily clad, hundreds of guests; the Chamberlin, at this time, was full. There was little anyone could do. The fire had already attained a glorious start and, as Val had predicted, the hotel went up like tinder. It was built of wood throughout, with the exception of the foundations, and there was no chance of stopping it.

By some miracle nobody was hurt, although hundreds of thousands of dollars in personal belongings were lost in the haste of the escape. The Chamberlin was now blazing to the skies at the west end, illuminating the land and the sea for miles. It was a red pit of leaping, devilish flame. There was an occasional crash somewhere inside of the place as some great timber fell. There was the continual tinkle of broken glass, and through every window the flames leaped, gaining headway incredibly.

Through the rent night sounded the thin, golden call of the bugle at Fortress Monroe, a few hundred yards away. It was the fire call. In a few minutes the soldiers were there, dragging their equipment, pitifully impotent against the magnitude of the debacle. Other organizations were there almost as soon—they came from Phoebus first, and then from Hampton, and then from Newport News, the last a great, chugging monster of a motor truck.

The thin lines of water were absolutely lost in the ever-climbing flames. And now the dawn began to come in over the sea, a golden dawn that was thinned, somehow, against the wonder of the great pile of flame. Hundreds of people crowded in front of the hotel, watching it burning. It was said on authority that everyone seemed to be out, and that being the case, Val and Eddie returned to their automobile and dressed

in haste. Then they returned to the fire, but there was nothing to do but watch. No human agency could stop that devouring monster of flame, though the firemen worked like diminutive, foreshortened demons against it, scurrying here and there, all but being caught under the fall of some wall or column, even darting inside the red hot walls where they thought some human might be penned. It was the last of the famous old hotel.

"What about Miss Pomeroy?" asked Eddie, turning to his employer.

Val regarded him in silence. "Why, I guess you're right," he said at length. "Now would seem to be the time to get out there and dig up old Pomeroy's money, wouldn't it?"

Eddie nodded.

"I don't think Teck'll go out there for an hour or two yet—its only five o'clock now. We can be finished by the time he comes."

Val acquiesced. "That's right. It'll be just as well if we can get that done before he gets out. There are complications whenever he shows up."

In a few moments they had the flivver pointed toward Hampton, and were chugging on their way. The trip was not a long one—fifteen or twenty minutes sufficed to cover the intervening ground. They knew where Teck was, so there was no necessity of hiding their machine before advancing upon the cottage. They stopped beside the door.

The Virginia hills, at that time of the morning, just tipped by the rising sun, were at their prettiest, blue in the distance, softened in the ambient air. Bird life had already awakened, and there came to them, through the twittering of the small birds, the lusty

crowing of a rooster ushering in his friend, the sun.

They knocked on the door, and waited a few minutes for an answer.

"Terrible time to go calling," muttered Val. Dragging them out of bed at this time. Guess they won't mind, though, when they hear what I have to say."

He knocked again. Still there was no answer—no sign of life in the cottage. "Sound sleepers," he said, thundering upon the resonant door with the knocker. Nobody stirred within.

"That's funny," he said. "Somebody ought to have heard that. I wonder . . ." he turned and looked at Eddie, inquiringly.

"Never can tell, sir," said Eddie sententiously. "Let's look around."

A walk around the house soon showed them that the kitchen window was open.

"Of course," commented Val, "it's hardly the approved mode of entering a lady's home, but . . ."

Eddie was already inside, not waiting to trouble himself with the ethics of the case. A moment later Val followed him.

There was not a sign of life in the rooms. A rapid glance at the beds showed them that they had not been slept in.

Jessica was gone.

XXXIII

THE SEARCH FOR THE GIRL

The two men stared at each other in puzzlement. This was a development that they had not looked for. Last night—not so early, either—they had left Jessica and the old woman Elizabeth here. Nothing was said about any proposed departure—that is, except the proposed departure of Val, which had been suggested by Jessica, and which he never had any intention of carrying out, even had not Elizabeth stopped them and explained the case.

He knew for certain that Jessica intended to stay here for a time; certainly she had had no intention of leaving last night. If she had left, it had been a sudden affair. Perhaps . . .

"I think this is where the fine Italian mitt of old boy Teck comes in," put in Eddie, speaking Val's thought. "What do you think, sir?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," answered Val. "They went awfully quick, it seems to me. The point at issue is—where did she go and where is she now—to say nothing of why did she go?"

They stood in the little living room and discussed the matter from several different angles.

"It seems to me," said Val, "that if she has gone some place in a hurry—in such a hurry—it must be against her will. The only one who would make her do anything against her will is Teck, of course. That

eliminates the rest of the world, Eddie. Now, where is she now?"

"Well, my guess is that she's where Teck can keep an eye on her—to see that she stays put. Now, last night, as we know, sir, Teck was at the Chamberlin." He looked significantly at Val.

"My God!" ejaculated Val. "She might——"

The rest of it was lost, because he bolted for the flivver and cranked her up violently. Only by making a flying leap for the seat was Eddie able to go along, so quickly did Val do things now.

For the first time there was rage in Val's heart against Teck. Up to now he had been intrigued by the novelty of the chase, the refreshment of the adventure, just when he had thought that life was drab and stale; and if he had had any feeling against Teck at all—leaving out the resentment at the murder of Mat Masterson—it was one of a rather curious sort of gratitude.

But now Teck had seemingly struck at Val's most vital place. When an attempt had been made on Val's life by Teck, he had foiled it and held no rancor; it was just another thing that had happened. But to cause Jessica to disappear—that was another thing entirely, and an important one. Somehow, Val construed it as a direct attack on himself; as a matter of fact it hit him far harder than an attack on himself could ever have done. He was perfectly willing to admit what a tremendous hold Jessica had taken on him. She meant to him all that life held worth while; she meant his future; his present; his Paradise. It was not something he would give up without a memorable struggle.

He was sure that they had hit on the solution. That, if Jessica was gone, she was somewhere in Teck's

power. These things flashed through Val's mind as he forced the car to its utmost speed over the rough roads back to the Point. They bounced from side to side in the jolting, swaying car, taking the rough spots on high, slowing down for no curves and corners.

Far in front of them a great column of smoke rose to the everlasting skies, and sometimes this black, billowing mass was shot through and through with leaping flames. The Chamberlin was still burning fiercely. Coming from Hampton they had to slow up a bit, because the roads were full of people all bound for the fire, on foot, in horsedrawn vehicles, and in motor cars.

They made the best time they could, however, seeming oblivious to the maledictions that were hurled at them from pedestrians whom they missed narrowly, and drivers of motor cars which missed them narrowly. At last they drew up in front of the great pyre that had been the Chamberlin.

It was mostly all smoke now, though here and there the flames, red, hungry, angry, still licked through the swirling blackness of the smoke. The hotel was almost completely gutted, a great heap of blackened ruins, and the smell of burning wood and cloth filled the air.

A large crowd stood against the sea wall, thousands of spectators. Val looked at them hastily, keenly. He was looking for Teck. This big man would know where Jessica was, he was sure. He would drag the information from him if he had to do it in front of these thousands of people.

Angrily he strode through the crowd, leaving Eddie in the car to keep the engine running. He thought it possible he might have to take another hurried trip.

He did not know where, or why—but you never could tell, he told himself. He examined the massed humanity sharply, searching ever for the one face. Teck was large; he should not have been hard to pick out of such a crowd, and Val thought it quite likely that he was there. His fingers itched to be at the big man's throat; he did not think of him as a cripple, a man without hands. He thought of him as something vicious, something dangerous, something to be shaken like a rat, crushed like a snake.

His eyes were red and bloodshot from lack of sufficient sleep, but they were keen and alert, and his large bulk gained for him ready access into the crowd of people, ready passage through them where a smaller man might have been at a disadvantage. He scrutinized all who came within his vision closely, sharply, but could not see Teck. Once he thought he saw his figure in front of him, looming over the people around. The man's back was turned, so he could not be sure, and by the time he had forced his way to where he had seen the figure, it had disappeared.

But there were thousands of people there, and it could easily have been that Teck was in the crowd and he had not seen him, Val told himself. The entire population, it seemed to him, of Hampton and Phœbus and a half dozen other smaller towns in the locality, had turned out to the fire, and the crowd was being augmented every minute by arrivals from Newport News and still farther towns that had heard of the fire, and had seen its smoke in the placid Virginia skies.

Once he caught a glimpse of the Rat in the crowd—a few feet ahead of him. He dived for the gangster, plunging through the mass of people, scattering them right and left, but by the time he had arrived at the

spot the Rat had slipped away somewhere else, gliding through the throng easily, with city-bred slipperiness.

He pushed his way to the front, and stood for a moment in thought. It was plain that he had little chance of finding Teck in this constantly growing crowd, unless it was by accident.

A hand touched his arm, lightly, and a beloved voice came through the air to him.

"Oh, Val, how glad I am to find you here!"

He whirled swiftly, a great relief in his heart. Jessica was standing next to him.

XXXIV

WHEN GRAVEYARDS YAWNED

A WARM, grateful glow enveloped Val as he looked upon Jessica's slight figure standing there beside him in the crowd. There were thousands of people around them, yet the others seemed to him as shadows on a screen; he thought he and Jessica were the only realities there, the only beings of flesh and blood. Everyone else was out of focus; of two dimensions only. He felt the touch of her hand on his arm, and it thrilled him through his clothes.

So she was safe! A sigh of relief escaped him, and his whole world seemed different. Now, the fire in front of them, for instance. What a splendid bonfire the Chamberlin made! How appropriate, in this vast expanse of sea and sky. It seemed to him like a bonfire of celebration—rejoicing in the fact that he was once more together with Jessica; that she was standing next to him and he could hear the soft caress in her gentle tones.

"How glad I am to find you here!"

He said the words to himself, over and over, swiftly Truly, they rang pleasantly on the ear. She was glad to see him. That was miraculous—and yet it was as it should be. Last night she had sent him away. He contrasted her utterances with those of last night, and could not bring himself to credence in the fact that it was the same girl. It was not the same girl, he told

himself. Last night Teck had spoken to him with the lips of Jessica. That was last night. This morning Jessica was speaking to him with the heart of Jessica. That was this morning—and forever.

He turned to her with shining eyes.

"Glad!" he said. "If you knew how happy I am to see you, Jessica, you would——"

"Of course," she said. "I know." Quietly, with infinite understanding.

"How do you happen to be here?" he asked, simply for the sake of talking. It did not make much difference to him what he said, so long as he stood there talking with her—saying something that would cause her to answer; that would cause her voice to ring upon his ears. In front of them the Chamberlin smoked and burned fitfully, yet they saw it not. A great crowd of people hemmed them in on all sides, but it was as though they were alone.

"It's quite a story," she said. He turned to her inquiringly.

She told him the story readily, apologizing for her attitude last night when he had called after returning from the old house. She told him of how Teck had made her promise to marry him to-day—and of how she had resolved to cast off his baneful influence over her by flight back to New York, there to hide herself away from him, somewhere. Of how she had discovered that Teck had anticipated such a move, and guarded against it.

After she and Elizabeth had returned to the house they had held a council of war to decide on ways and means. She had been almost ready to give up, but she was thankful that Elizabeth was made of sterner stuff. They had finally decided to wait an hour or

more, and try to slip out by the kitchen window. Teck's man could not watch all sides of the house at once, and it had seemed as though they had rather more than an even chance of making it.

And so it turned out. It happened so easily that she could scarcely understand her hesitation. They had gone through the window and merged themselves with the shadows immediately, keeping away from the road until they were quite half a mile away from the house. Then they took to the road and were in Hampton in a short time. At Hampton they found a room in a quiet hotel.

"And you intended——" he began.

"To leave by the first boat. Ignace would be going out to the cottage, I thought. It would never occur to him to look for me here, of course. By the time he discovered my absence I would be on my way to New York."

He looked at her, puzzled for a moment. "Then what are you doing here now?" he asked. "Don't you know that Teck must be here somewhere—if he sees you all your plans will be knocked into a cocked hat."

"Why, I'm here because——" she flushed to the tips of her tiny ears suddenly, and was awkwardly, deliciously silent. "Why," she began again, "because——"

It came to him at once why she was here. How stupid he had been not to guess. Why, she was here because he was stopping at the Chamberlin, and she was afraid something might have happened to him in the fire. Crudely he put the question to her, with masculine lack of reserve.

"You—you came to see if I was safe?" he asked, a

little incredulously, a little amazed that she should do this just because of her interest in him. She did not answer, but from her expression he could see that he had hit upon the answer. She suddenly showed a great and absorbing interest in the fire.

"Where's Elizabeth?" he asked her.

"She's here," replied Jessica. They turned and located Elizabeth standing about a dozen feet from them, stonily and determinedly intent on letting them have their tête-à-tête without interruption from her.

"I just came from the cottage," announced Val. "I went out to see you——"

"So early," she murmured.

"Yes," he replied. "You see, it's of very great importance. It's about the missing money—I think I've located it."

Her look of interest was good to see. "Really!" she said. He felt her hand tighten on his arm. It just occurred to both of them that she had not drawn her hand away. That she had left it there after touching his arm to draw his attention to her. The effect on Val was to make him absurdly happy. The effect on Jessica was to make her draw her hand away hastily, —but not too hastily. There seemed a kind of reluctance in it.

"I think so," he continued. "But this is no place to discuss it. I say, I'm awfully hungry—I could do with a little breakfast. How about you? There's a nice little restaurant in Phœbus that I know—we could all go there. It's still very early, and we could eat and get out to your place before Teck starts, I think."

Phœbus is a little town immediately outside of Fortress Monroe and Old Point Comfort, inhabited mostly

by old blue clad men who stand on the street corners and argue about Pickett's charge, or the first battle of Bull Run. Men to whom the Civil War is still far more of a reality than the World War just completed.

"I'm famished," confessed Jessica. "We can talk at breakfast—Elizabeth knows everything I know."

"Eddie Hughes is in this with me—and we want to include him when we make plans," said Val. "So that's all right. Let's go."

They called Elizabeth, and pushed their way through the crowd to where Eddie sat in the flivver waiting for them. In three minutes they were in a quaint little restaurant, being waited on by the proprietor himself. Nobody else was in the place, the fire being a far greater attraction there than a mere meal, which one could have at any time.

Over the breakfast, which was an excellent one, they discussed the affair. Val told them the events of the last night. How he had come alone to the cottage and found Teck there, and had continued on alone to the old house. He described vividly to them the struggle there and how he had awakened, bound, in the dilapidated living room. He told of the blood dripping through the ceiling, and of the woman's scream he had heard ringing through the night.

"That was me," admitted Jessica.

"You!" echoed Val in amazement. She nodded.

"Why, how on earth did you come to be there at that time of night, alone, and——"

"It was rather a crazy idea," she dimpled. "You see, after Ignace left—the first time—he came back later, you know—and still you did not appear, I decided that it was quite possible you had gone on alone—so I went after you. When I got there the

door to the living room downstairs was locked. I could not see you in any of the other rooms, and thought you might be upstairs. Oh, how frightened I was, all alone in that old house, with the storm pounding so! When I got upstairs above the living room I saw a body lying on the floor in the dark, and I thought it was you—that was the first thing that occurred to me." She said this frankly, as though it were quite natural that she should think of him first. "My nerves were all unstrung, with the dark and the storm and the lightning and thunder, and being alone there, and I lost control of them completely for a minute and screamed. That's the scream you heard. At that moment Ignace and another man seized me and dragged me out. I hardly knew what I was doing—they took me back to the cottage. The storm was making so much noise I guess you couldn't have heard us."

So that cleared up another mystery, Val thought. But there was still another he was thinking of—the mysterious man who had appeared to him in the flash of lightning; Val rather thought that it was that same man who had cut him loose. Who was he?

He told them about the incident, and described the man carefully.

"It could be anybody around here," said Jessica. "Half the men down here wear that kind of hat and have goatees. I don't know who it could have been. Why should he come in and cut you loose—if it was he?"

Val shook his head. "I give it up," he laughed. "Do you know, for awhile he seemed to me like a ghost. I've never seen a ghost, but I suppose I came as close to seeing one last night as I'll ever come.

Why, he had that unearthly look when I saw him at the window——"

"That's funny," broke in Elizabeth, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, but had listened with rapt attention. "That's very funny."

"What is?" asked Val and Jessica.

"Why, about a ghost, you know," said the old woman. "You know, Germinal said he saw a ghost—said that graveyards were yawning and graves giving up their dead. He was as scared as I ever seen a nigger or anyone else be. He trembled like a leaf."

"I wonder if he could have seen the same—ah—thing—that you saw," Jessica turned to Val.

"I don't know," said Val, "but last night was certainly the right kind of a night to see such things, I'll tell the world. If ever there was a stage set for the appearance of things that don't belong with the living, there was one set last night." He shivered involuntarily, and smiled immediately. "When I think of that old house in the dark, with the rain pounding on it like on a drum . . ."

He trailed off into a silence, lost in the wonder of Jessica's eyes; he could almost feel himself falling . . . falling . . . falling . . . into their deeps, losing his identity in them, drenched with their loveliness. He brought himself back with a jerk, just before the silence became awkward.

"But I was telling you about where the money is," he said, coming back to the business on hand. "Do you know where Mount Monroe is?" he inquired of Jessica.

She nodded. "Why, that's on our property—it's not really a mountain, you know. Just a hill, about a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet high, at the

most. Heavily wooded—over the east end of our place. Why?"

"Do you know a secret cave there? One known to only yourself and your father?"

Her eyes lighted up with remembrance. "Of course!" she declared. "Away up, near the top. The front of it is covered with brush and stones, so that you'll never guess there's a cave there. What great times I used to have playing there when I was a kid—I discovered it, you know. I never told anybody about it but my father—it was our secret. And the money——"

"Here," said Val, handing her the memorandum Eddie had written at his dictation the night before.

"Go unto Mount Monroe, to the secret cave known only to Jessica, my daughter. To her, my sole relative and heir, is left all that is there contained.

PETER J. POMEROY."

Her face lighted up in comprehension.

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "If that isn't just like my father—dear old man. That's just the very place he would have thought of. I'm surprised it never occurred to me. How did you discover all this?" she asked Val.

He told her how he had located the information desired in the Bible—the book which had traveled so often between the two factions in this affair. "Your father died so suddenly, Jessica——"

"Yes, I was in Europe at the time. If he had had time, he would surely have told me where to look for the information. It's just the kind of a thing he would do, you know. He was mad on the one idea of conserving his money, poor father. And to think I never saw him in life again."

There was a deep silence, in reverence for a memory of the departed. It was Jessica herself who broke the silence at last.

"And now——" she queried on a rising voice.

"And now," said Val, "if we're all through eating, I move that we all go out to Mount Monroe just as quickly as that old flivver can jerk us out there, collect your money—and go back to New York."

"And Ignace——" objected Jessica.

"He won't know where we are, I think," said Val. "We don't have to go near the cottage to get to Mount Monroe, do we?"

"No—we can get to it from the other direction," said Jessica—"from the side on which the old haunted house stands."

"All right," directed Val. "It won't take long—we can go right out, get the loot, and get back here probably in an hour." The party rose simultaneously, while Val laid a bill on the table to pay for the meal.

Suddenly he saw Jessica grow pale; the mask of fear crept over her countenance again as she stared, fascinated, at the door. Instinctively, everybody turned to the door, drawn by her fixed look.

Bulked in the doorway, smiling upon them pleasantly, was the great figure of Ignace Teck.

XXXV

THE CHASE

He was characteristically his lazy, lounging self now, hands—ostensibly, of course, he seemed to have hands—thrust deep into his pockets, a courteous, nonchalant smile upon his lips, his face turned so that the livid scar that disfigured one cheek was invisible at the angle. He lounged up to Jessica, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the party.

"Having a party, I see," he remarked pleasantly. "Good idea; I feel rather hungry myself." She shrank back from him, not daring to meet his eyes, and yet unable to move a step back. She said nothing; just stood there, the pallor of her cheeks contrasting piteously with the splendor of her hair, her eyes gone dead of a sudden.

"You remember you have an appointment with me to-day," Teck reminded her. "It's something of a surprise to see you here, you know. I thought——"

"You thought she was waiting for you, safely caught in her cottage in the woods, didn't you, Iggy?" said Val, stepping in between them. With a grateful glance at Val, Jessica stepped aside, glad to have someone else distract Teck's attention.

"What is that to you?" asked Teck maliciously, still courteous, still mild and smiling. "Miss Pomeroy's movements——"

"Miss Pomeroy's movements interest me, Iggy.

Peculiar, isn't it?" smiled Val. "Sorry if my presence here seems to upset any of your plans; but of course you can make others, can't you? That's one of the best things you do."

"Oh, one can always change one's plans, you know," assented Teck carelessly.

"Well, if it's all the same to you, Iggy, you can change yours right now," said Val, still smiling as pleasantly as Teck himself. There was an undercurrent of menace in his tone, however, that Teck caught and read aright.

He glanced straight into Val's eyes before answering, hesitating a moment, picking his words, evidently.

"Do you propose to do the changing?" he asked innocently, but his tone was flinty.

"I do," announced Val. "I propose to change your plans so much that you'll wish you never had seen me——"

"If you must know, my friend, I wish that now," put in the big man.

"Well, then, if I'm your friend, you'd better take the advice of a friend and get out right now," said Val dangerously.

"Surely you're not afraid of me," mocked Teck. "Why, what harm can I, a poor creature without——"

"Never mind that stuff," broke in Val rudely. "I've heard it before, and it won't get you anywhere with me." Teck turned to Jessica once more.

"Will you come with me, Jessica?" he asked politely.

And then an amazing thing happened. Jessica raised her eyes and looked directly into his. It was not a quick, frightened glance. It was a long, full, deep glance, as though to assure herself that the menace and fascination those eyes had held for her

were there no longer. For a full fifteen seconds, without speaking, she looked into his eyes, and at the end of that time he had the grace to drop his own. He knew in that instant that, somehow, he had lost his power over her.

"No, I won't go with you, Ignace," she said in a low tone, but each word was clipped off short with decision and distinctness. "I won't go with you ever again. I don't want to see you again, ever."

She turned to Val. "Are you ready to come?" she asked.

"Righto!" he said.

Without another glance at Teck, leaving him standing there in the center of the room as though he were a piece of the furniture, they walked out.

Once on the sidewalk they entered the flivver and turned once more in the direction of the still smoking Chamberlin. On the other side of the street Val noticed Horseface sitting in a high-powered automobile, watching them carefully. As they looked back they saw Teck standing in the doorway of the restaurant, gazing after them.

He followed slowly, as they did not have far to go to get to the crowd that stood along the sea wall in front of the burning ruin. Val parked the car at the curb, and the party got out.

"Now where?" asked Jessica.

"Well, we have to throw them off our trail in some way," meditated Val. "Teck'll be here in a minute. And there was Horseface with a big machine outside the restaurant. You can rest assured they'll take steps to keep us in sight. I suppose the Rat's around here somewhere, too—looking us over."

He paused for a moment, thinking rapidly. He was not afraid of Teck and his men, yet it would be better if they could get out to where the treasure was hidden without being followed by them. He didn't want to have a fight with them while the women were there.

"I have it," he announced at length. He glanced at the large crowd, which now numbered perhaps five thousand persons. "Let's push into the crowd and lose ourselves. They won't be able to keep track of us in there——" he pointed with a flick of his hand at the mass along the wall.

"Teck'll watch our car, expecting us to come back to it. Well, we won't come back to it at all, see. We'll stay in the crowd for ten or fifteen minutes, and then we can ooze out of it and make for the street car to Hampton. From Hampton we can walk over to Mount Monroe easily—it can't be very far."

"It isn't," assented Jessica. "I think you've hit on the way to do it."

Ten minutes later they mixed thoroughly with the crowd that swirled in the direction of the trolley car, and in another moment they were seated inside.

"There," said Jessica, "I think we've thrown them off now." They glanced around them and saw nobody they could recognize in the crowd. There was a clanging of the bell, the track was cleared of the people who were crossing, and the car started on its way. The trolley turned the corner and was lost to sight.

The Rat, who had been hidden in the crowd, turned and ran for Phœbus. At the automobile opposite the restaurant he found Horseface and Teck.

"Dey just got on de car fer Hampton," he announced.

"All right," said Teck. "Let's go."

They entered the big car. There was a sullen muttering of the engine, and the large, blunt nose of the machine was turned in the direction of Hampton. Horseface pressed a button and the car plunged ahead, singing on its way.

XXXVI

IN THE SECRET CAVE

The street car was crowded, but long before they got to Hampton Val had been able to catalog every person in it; there was no one he knew; no one, so far as he could determine, connected with Teck. So far, so good. He promised himself a little fun this morning, if they managed to elude Teck.

It was the last act of the play, he told himself. The girl was sitting beside him—he was thrillingly conscious of that—and they were on their way to uncover the treasure; it made little difference to him, actually, whether or not there was a treasure. He had had his thrill out of the chase. That had become his philosophy—that the joy of Life was not in the capture but in the chase—the chase was the important thing. He was not able to relinquish himself absolutely to this philosophy, however, for the simple reason that there was the slight matter of the capture of Jessica to be still attended to—surely his joy in that would not be ended with the chase.

There are those who would say that, did he but know it, his great moment of fulfillment, as regards to Jessica, *was* in the chase, and he would come to realize that in the end; Val, however, cast that thought aside negligently, scornfully. To possess Jessica. . . . He knew of no simple chase that could compare to that. No . . . perhaps his philosophy was not exactly all

that it should be, either, he considered. Perhaps there was something wrong with a conduct of life, a method of thought, that could be summed up in a sentence. Life—he capitalized it—was bigger than that. They would see. . . .

Jessica broke into his thoughts. "I'm all excited, all atingle," she confessed, turning to him. He was recalled to mundane things with a start—he had forgotten where he was, where he was going, in the last minute. He came back to life to find himself sitting next to the most adorable creature in all this world—in fact, in all —possible worlds, he decided, taking in rather a great deal of territory.

"In a few minutes we'll know whether it's true or not," she said. "Whether there really is any money——"

"Certainly there is, Jessica," answered Morley. "D'you see that spot of coast?" He pointed far off to the sea line. "That's the exact point where a Spanish galleon, loaded with gold, was sunk in the sixteenth century. The ship sank, but they managed to get the gold off. From ancient manuscripts, I have learned that the doubloons, the gold ornaments, the rubies and diamonds, hundreds of pounds of fine ivory, spices from Araby and scents from Cathay—all, all are buried on Mount Monroe. Your father had some queer idea that it was his own money he was burying, but he was mistaken. He was burying Spanish gold, romance, adventure, love—everything!"

She broke in with a gay laugh, fully restored to herself now.

"Oh, I'm sure you're right,—Val," she tinkled. Val felt happy, supremely happy. The sound of his name

in her voice, the way it came off her lips, slowly, as though she were loath to let it go, caressingly, hesitatingly!

"What are you going to do with all that money?" Val asked.

"Me? Oh, I don't know; just be happy, I guess. Poor old dad," she murmured, recalling him to her mind by some chain of thought that Val could only guess at.

"Happy . . ." murmured Val. "If money could bring happiness, I guess I'd have much more than my share."

"Haven't you?" she asked.

He stared at her. "Not yet," he said slowly. "I'm waiting for . . . something . . ."

She had no answer to this, but the tip of a little ear turned rosy, and he knew that she understood. He was satisfied. Really, you know——

"Hampton!" shouted the conductor.

The party got off there. Val and Eddie looked around them sharply, but could discern no glimpse of their enemy.

"Thrown him off," remarked Val.

"Maybe, sir," disagreed Eddie. He was a pessimist; he always hoped for the worst, so that the best could surprise him.

Val looked at him quickly. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Did you see anything, old crêpe-hanger?"

Eddie shook his head. "Nothing, sir. But we haven't seen the last of that bird yet."

As a matter of fact, they hadn't. Far back in the recesses of a store that looked out upon the car line, Teck was stationed, his bright eyes observing every-

thing without himself being seen. Back of the store stood the high-powered car that he had picked up, somewhere.

At the suggestion of Jessica, the party stopped at a hardware dealer's to get a new battery for Val's flashlight. He would need it in the cave, which, while not very deep, was low and dark.

In a few minutes they had left Hampton behind and were in the open country. Val and Jessica, like two children, chattered all the way in their excitement. Jessica was now her light-hearted self, with the glow of happiness in her eyes, the lithe swing of youth in her walk; the fresh air whipped the roses into her cheeks as they went along, her hand in the crook of Val's arm. Val did his best to keep his feet on the ground, but it was tough work. He felt that, given just a little more, he would tear his moorings asunder and float high over the world, like a great balloon that spurned such common things as good red Virginia soil.

They gave the little cottage where Jessica had been living a wide berth and approached Mount Monroe by a road Val had not yet trodden. He could see the hill from where they were, a knobby, brush and vegetation-covered eminence rising to a height of perhaps two hundred feet.

The road they walked was very narrow, so that they had to go along in single file. On each side the underbrush hemmed them in completely. Beyond the brush was the forest, one of the few forests left in that part of the country. Once Val thought he heard something moving in the bushes opposite them.

He leaped for the bushes and tore them aside, but could find nothing.

He laughed. "Nerves getting jumpy again," he remarked. "But I guess we've left him behind this time for fair."

"Him," of course, referred to Teck, and the very allusion to the man caused a slight damper to fall on the party. They pushed on in silence after that for a few minutes.

Finally they reached the foot of the hill. From where they stood it appeared to Val that the hill was much bigger than he had thought it from a distance. It was not very high, but it spread over a great deal of territory, and it was so heavily wooded that it seemed almost impenetrable. Plainly, one would have to know his way about, on this hill, to get anywhere.

"From now on I'd better lead," said Jessica, coming to the front. "I know just how to get to it."

They followed her in single file through a tiny foot-path that she led them to unerringly, winding away up the hillside, around and through the trees, skirting great bowlders that suddenly blocked the path, and in one place hugging the side of the hill seventy-five feet above the solid earth, a little path only two feet wide.

"I say," protested Val, "this wasn't built for a man of my displacement. Parts of me hang over, you know."

Jessica looked back at him, laughing. "Well, don't lose your nerve, anyway."

They hugged the wall until they came around the next curve, where the path broadened out again. Val and the two behind him breathed a sigh of relief. As for Jessica, the peril of the passage had not seemed to affect her in the least. She had not gone that way for years, but it had come back to her instantly, and

she experienced all the old time confidence. They kept on their way, up around the sides of the hill, until it seemed as though it would not be possible to go further —as though they had covered every possible part of the hill.

"Here we are," called Jessica from around the bend in the road.

They hurried around to where she was standing. It was steep on the side of the hill, almost at the summit. On one side rose the wall of soil and vegetation. In front was a plateau of perhaps twenty feet. Over the edge of the plateau there was a sheer drop of a hundred and fifty feet to the rocks below, broken by an occasional tree that jutted out from the side of the rocky slope.

"Where is it?" asked Val. They clustered around her.

"There," she pointed to a mass of shrubbery at the side of the road that looked no different from the shrubbery all along the way. "You could never find it, not in a million years," she said.

Stepping to it, she forced the shrubbery aside, disclosing a hole that was perhaps two feet high, stopped up by a large bowlder. "You'll have to move the rock away."

It was true. So cleverly had Nature concealed the place that one might have camped outside of the cave for weeks and never noticed it; it was a fitting hiding place—one could never in a lifetime come upon it by accident. And having come upon it, it would never occur to one that any other human had ever been there before. Old Peter Pomeroy had chosen wisely—that could be seen at a glance.

"All right, Eddie," said Val. "Let's go." He motioned to the great bowlder.

The two men attempted perfunctorily to roll the rock away from the entrance, but it scarcely budged. They pushed again, with the same result. It was plain that this rock could not be moved in that perfunctory manner—they would have to go at it in earnest.

"Got that cold chisel, Eddie?" asked Val.

"Here y'are, sir," Eddie handed him the chisel. With this Val dug away as much dirt as possible from the base of the bowlder, to give it free passage. It was imbedded in the soil to a depth of several inches. Val cleared away the soil in front.

He took off his coat, and Eddie did likewise.

"Now, Eddie," he said. The two men advanced upon the bowlder once more.

"Let's do it at the same moment," said Val, taking his place on the opposite side of the stone and getting as good a grip as possible. Eddie nodded.

"One—two—three—Go!" said Val. Red in the face from the effort, their muscles bulging, the two men heaved. The rock moved a few inches away from the entrance to the cave.

"Again," directed Val. They moved it several inches more. In a few minutes they had it far enough away from the black entrance to the hole in the side of the hill to permit them to enter.

Panting and perspiring, the men paused for a moment to dry their faces and catch their breaths.

"I'll go in," said Jessica, all excitement.

"Better not," warned Val. "Not yet, anyway. You can't tell what you'll find there—it's many years since you've been in it."

"Nonsense," scoffed Jessica. "Let's both go in."

"Righto!" said Val. "Where's that flash?"

Eddie handed it to him, and he stooped to enter the cave.

"It gets higher when you're about five or six feet inside," said Jessica, who was right behind him. "High enough for you to stand up."

Val grunted in response. All was black before him; he could see absolutely nothing. He brought the pocket flashlight to bear on the floor and side of the cave.

The floor was smooth as though it had been rolled out with a tennis court roller. The walls were jagged, dripping with moisture. He stood up. The roof just cleared his head. A moment later Jessica was standing beside him. A frightened bat, with a tremendous whirring of wings, flew round and round in circles, startling Jessica momentarily.

"Oh!" she said, grasping Val's arm. That steadied her instantly.

"See anything?" she asked.

"Not a thing," he replied. "How much farther does this cave run back?"

"Only a few feet, and then around a bend to the left," she replied.

They advanced, playing the gleam of light on every side, letting it shine in all likely places.

"Turn here," Jessica guided him.

The cave now broadened out to the proportions of a chamber. At the level of Val's head was a small natural shelf in the living rock. He gave an exclamation of delight when his light fell upon it.

On the shelf was a tin box about a foot and a half square.

XXXVII

BLOOD AND GOLD

"THE treasure!" exclaimed Val.

"The treasure!" exclaimed Jessica.

She clapped her hands in childish glee. He reached up and lifted down the box, which was quite heavy. A rapid glance around the cave convinced him that there was nothing else there. This natural chamber in the hillside was the end of the cave. There was no need to stay there longer.

With scarcely concealed excitement they turned toward the entrance and made their way out. They blinked in the sharp sunlight for a moment, scarcely able to see, so great was the transition from the dense gloom of the cave.

"That's it!" exclaimed Elizabeth as the box came to view. "I remember that box."

It was an ordinary tin box, such as is used to hold valuable papers, black, with a band of thin gold drawn about it, and a handle on the top. Val placed the box on the ground in front of the entrance to the cave and tried to open it. It was locked.

"The chisel, Eddie," he said.

With the chisel he forced the lock quickly, the others gathering close over the box in their eagerness to get a first glimpse of its contents. He threw the cover up. The box was filled almost to the top with banknotes, in denominations of one hundred to one thousand. Under the banknotes were piles of stocks

and bonds. A rapid calculation on the spot showed them that there was nearly half a million dollars in money and negotiable securities in front of them.

Rapt in their interest, the small group clustered around the box, lost to everything but what was before them. Half a million dollars!

"Oh!" murmured Jessica, clasping her hands together. "To think——"

There was a movement behind them, and they heard a voice. So absorbed were they that they had forgotten all else—forgotten the chance of Teck's appearance. They whirled now.

In front of them stood Teck and his three roughnecks, the three carrying revolvers menacingly.

"I rather think we'll have to relieve you of all that," remarked Teck pleasantly, his eyes gleaming at the open box, at the wealth displayed therein.

A swift, determined glance passed between Eddie and his employer—it was a thing of a fraction of a second, but it was enough. They knew that this was no time to give up.

A lightning kick of Eddie's foot disarmed one of the men, and at the same moment both Val and he leaped for them. There was no time to use the weapons, so swiftly did they attack. It was a rough and tumble fight.

A sudden lunge by Val, and Horseface dropped to the ground, knocked out clean.

"Clean 'em up, Eddie!" he shouted.

They were all over their opponents in an instant. Val was the poetry of motion in his actions, lithe as a mountain cat, and as terrible. Closing with his man, he grasped his gun-hand, the weapon being discharged in the air. There was a dull crack, and the gun

dropped from his hand, the wrist hanging uselessly, broken. Val lifted him and threw him at Teck, who was now jumping at him.

Kicking the body of the tough aside, Val leaped at Teck. The two great bulks met in midair and hung there for an instant, their big bodies straining. Eddie was getting the best of his opponent, forcing him back and down, pounding violently at him with his fists.

Val could feel the muscles of Teck swelling under his arms as they strained backward and forward. This was no mean opponent, with his great weight and his terrible passion. Teck's face was livid in his anger, and against the pasty skin his scar throbbed and glowed evilly, his mouth sending forth a stream of foul curses. He wrenched an arm loose and started to flick it upwards at Val's head, but Val had had that done to him once; he was watching for him. He seized the arm in the nick of time, and it never landed.

"Now, Iggy!" panted Val, forcing him backwards, landing blows on his stomach as he spoke, to each one of which Teck grunted in pain. "Over you go!" They were now on the edge of the cleared space, overhanging the valley below.

Backwards he forced him, and still backwards, always holding that right arm of his where it could do no harm. Over . . . over . . . still further . . .

A calm voice broke in on them, cold as steel, and emotionless.

"That will be about all of that, Teck."

Everything stopped in a moment, arms suspended in air, muscles taut. They looked in the direction from where the voice came.

A great gasp came from Teck and Jessica. Val stared in his astonishment.

It was the mysterious man he had seen last night in the lightning—the old man of mystery. With him were four policemen, with drawn revolvers.

Jessica grew ghastly pale; she swayed on her feet, staring unbelievingly at the apparition. Teck could not draw his eyes away. It was Jessica who spoke first, a cry drawn from her, involuntarily, amazedly.

"*Father!*"

Teck stared. "Peter Pomeroy!" he gasped, stepping backward as though from an apparition. It was his last step.

Behind him was a rock, on the very edge of the cliff, over which he tumbled. The last thing they saw was his pale face, disfigured by the scar, disappearing backward down the long drop. A hoarse scream echoed back, there was a crashing of underbrush, and silence.

The policemen jumped for the three toughs and took charge of them, but nobody noticed. Slowly Jessica was advancing to the aged man, who gazed at her, his face transfigured.

"Father!" she breathed again.

"Yes, it is I," he said.

In an instant she was sobbing on his breast, softly.

Val stared at Eddie and Eddie stared back just as wonderingly at Val.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Val exclaimed at length.

"So will I, sir," replied Eddie.

The scene between father and daughter was a touchingly pathetic one, and Val and Eddie discreetly busied themselves in diverting their attention to something else. They leaned over the cliff and tried to discover the body of Teck far below, but he had evidently rolled under a tree, because they could see nothing of him.

"Suppose we go down, sir," suggested Eddie. "We might come across him—he might not be dead; he might need assistance."

"Right, Eddie," assented Val.

Jessica and the old man, her father, were by now regaining coherence. "He told me you were dead, father," she said. "I've been laying flowers before an urn supposed to contain your ashes for over a year."

The old man smiled grimly. "I deny that I'm dead, Jessica," he said. "Though I've been as good as dead all that time. It's rather too long a yarn to spin here—let it wait till we get back to the house. We'd better go down with these young men to see if we can find Ignace."

So they made their way down the mountainside, Val and Eddie in the van, the officers with their prisoners following next, and Jessica and her father bringing up the rear. It was a pale Jessica who walked the down trail with her father; a pale one, and a weak one. The shock had been great, and she was still feeling it.

On a ledge near the bottom they found the body of Teck. Looking curiously smaller than he looked when he stood erect, sallow, his ugly scar a streak of lurid color across his face, he lay staring up at the sun. motionless. Only his eyes moved—played within his range of vision unceasingly.

Val felt his heart—it was still fluttering gently, but it was plain that he would not last long. They grouped around him and eyed him—not triumphantly, not gloatingly, but pityingly; pity that at the last he should be so broken and so helpless. And then, surprisingly, his lips moved and he spoke. He spoke in

a hoarse whisper, but his old bravado was still there; the sneering timbre of his voice still rang as of old.

"I'll be going now," he was saying in his whisper, weak, but steady voiced, retaining his consciousness with the sheer power of his will. "I've played my last trick." They bent over him to catch his words.

"Before I go I'd like to clear up a few things. I've lost, but the game was worth it." He spoke slowly, distinctly. The sergeant in charge of the police detail left the prisoners in the hands of the three subordinates, and took down what he said on his pad.

"In the first place, as you know," Teck smiled, cynical even in the face of death, "Peter Pomeroy had the bad grace not to die. To all intents and purposes he did die, and an hour after his death—it was sudden—the news of it went out to the papers, where it was printed the next day. He was removed to an undertaker's chapel, where he regained consciousness that evening."

He paused for a moment, wearied, but went on almost at once, forcing himself on, low voiced, distinct, even.

"I had him taken to my own rooms—you know them, Morley——" he smiled quietly. "That was when my great idea came to me. Although he regained consciousness, he had completely lost his voice and his memory. He remembered nothing, and the vocal chords were paralyzed. In some way, the news of his recovery did not get into the papers—that was the day of the great explosion in Wall Street, when so many lives were lost, and it crowded out small items of news. After that it wasn't news any more—I fixed the undertaker, and nothing was said about it. It wasn't hard to place an urn in a crematory and label

it 'Peter Pomeroy.' To all practical purposes, Peter Pomeroy was dead."

He was silent again for an instant. "As soon as he recovered sufficiently to be moved, still paralyzed vocally, still memoryless, I entered him in an asylum in the Middle West—you'll know where it is, Mr. Pomeroy—and told the superintendent that he was my brother, though he suffered from the delusion that he was someone else, a dead man. I paid for his keep there. My idea was to get hold of his money—as we all know, his money was never kept in banks, and I thought I'd have no great difficulty in locating it. With his daughter abroad and no other member of his immediate family alive, it should have been easy—and it would have been if he hadn't concealed the money so cleverly. As it was, Jessica returned and the money was still unfound.

"Slowly—by very gradual changes—his memory was beginning to come back to him, and he was able to talk a little, as I learned on my frequent visits there. His brain, I could see, was still not quite clear, and it was my hope that I'd be able to get the secret out of him—the hiding place of the money. I met with no luck until the last time I was there. He was incoherent, and fragmentary, but thoughts of his money seemed to be running through his mind, to the obscurity of almost everything else. He kept saying to me, in answer to my questions—'It's in the books . . . Virginia!' "

" 'The books' didn't mean much to me until, on the way back, I suddenly recollected that he had a couple of dozen of them in the house—and that he had seemed rather attached to them. Virginia, of course, was a live clew, but this is such a big place that one could

hunt here a lifetime without result. Probably, then, he had made a memorandum of the hiding place somewhere in his books, intending to tell Jessica about it, if he hadn't 'died' so suddenly.

"When I returned I found that Jessica had sold the books that same day. That was the reason I was suddenly so anxious to get the books, after disregarding them for so long. Luckily—for me—I never left town without having Jessica watched. I found out where she had sold the books, and also that Morley here, who was recognized by my man, had taken some of them away with him. It was easy enough to get them out of Morley's house, but the old man, Masterson, had not been so easy earlier in the evening. I had driven down there in a taxi and asked the driver—a friend of mine whose name I won't tell you—to wait outside. I found the old man alone, ready to go home, with the blinds pulled down. I offered to buy back the books, and he became suspicious, for some reason or other, and refused to sell until he had time to examine them at his leisure. He probably thought that if they were so valuable to me, they would be just as valuable to him. Anyway, I had no time to spare—I was afraid to spend too long a time at the job—and, after unsuccessfully trying to induce him to sell, I tried to take them away by force. The old man struggled hard, harder than I would have believed such an old man could fight—and I had to hit him. I didn't mean to hit him so hard, and I only wanted to quiet him, but he was fighting fiercely and I could not judge the force of the blow very well. It smashed his head in."

He was silent again for a moment. It was Val who spoke, eagerly.

"But how?" he asked. "With what?"

The other smiled grimly at him. "The same way I did for you in the haunted house—and your friend. Look here." He drew attention to his right arm, which nobody had noticed before, so interested were they in what he had to say.

The stump of his wrist was covered by a cap of metal, a heavy, bulky iron cap that must have weighed eight or nine pounds, fitting closely on his wrist. Such a weapon, swung by the arm of a strong man, was enough to kill an opponent with one blow easily—enough to smash in his head. Val drew it off, and found that there was a spring arrangement that clamped the wrist tightly, holding it firm on the stump.

"You see, I kept it in my right hand trouser pocket, always," explained Teck. "All I had to do was to push my wrist into it—it was fixed so that it seized my wrist firmly and stayed on. It was my own idea," he said, with a trace of modest pride.

"Nobody ever expected anything of the sort from me—and all I needed was the chance for one blow. I usually got that, because they weren't looking for it. Anyway," he went on, a little wearied, "I killed Masterson—nobody else had anything to do with it. I'm sorry for it, but it couldn't be helped. I was getting desperate in my haste; back in his asylum Pomeroy was recovering his memory and his voice, and I knew it would not be long before he was back here—they would not have been able to keep him, even had they been willing to take the chance, which I doubt. I may as well say that they acted in good faith there—they believed my story."

Pomeroy nodded. "That's true," he supplemented. "They released me as soon as I was able to explain the circumstances."

"I—I think that's about all," he said in a lower tone, evidently finding difficulty in continuing. "You know most of the rest. I'm ready to go now. It was a good game, and I nearly won——"

"If you had had a chance to examine the papers in the tin box," remarked old Pomeroy, "you would have discovered a memorandum to Jessica in which I direct her to pay you the sum of one hundred thousand dollars. I owed you that, I felt."

Teck's eyes clouded. "I might—have—known——" he murmured wearily. "But I took my chances and——" His head dropped back and his eyes closed. There was a silence on the little group, and they stood immovable for a few seconds.

The sergeant bent down and examined the body. "He's gone," he announced.

"I'll take charge of these men," he said briefly; "and of—this." He motioned to the body of Ignace Teck.

"We'll go back to the cottage—you can find us there if you need us, sergeant," said old Pomeroy. The police officer nodded.

XXXVIII

THE END OF THE TRAIL

In the cottage Val's place in the affair was explained to old Peter Pomeroy, and the man who had returned to the world nodded with gratitude at him, charmingly grateful for Val's assistance to his daughter. Pomeroy also explained, in brief, his own movements. He had been released from the asylum and had come East instantly, his first visit being to Virginia to see whether or not the money was still there.

He came at night—that's when his train landed him—and discovered that his daughter was down here, and Teck, and that things were happening. It was he whom Val had seen in the lightning, and it was he who had cut Val loose. It was his sibilant whisper of warning Val had heard down the stairs. The young man had seemed to be on the friendly side, but he was unfamiliar with the developments, and he did not wish to take the chance of disclosing himself until he knew exactly what was occurring down here, in his supposed absence.

He wished to discover just what it was Teck was attempting to do—this he discovered, of course. He would have disclosed himself to his daughter, but had

no chance that night. Germinal, the negro, had come out on the road and he had accosted him, intending to have him call Jessica out, in secret. But Germinal had nearly died of fright, thinking him a ghost, and had made off at top speed.

Peter Pomeroy had by now a pretty fair idea of what was going on; he decided that the only thing to do was to arrest Teck and his gang—to do it suddenly, unexpectedly, so as to give them no chance to escape. That was how he happened to appear so conveniently at the very spot where he was needed, ably assisted by four officers from Newport News.

He extended a pressing invitation to Val to stay at the cottage with them for a few days; which invitation was seconded by Jessica. Not that any such invitation to Val needed to be pressing.

. . . . .

It was several days later that Val had a conversation with his man Eddie.

"Eddie," he said, "what do you think of marriage?"

Eddie looked at him slowly. "I've heard it very highly spoken of, sir," he replied.

"I know, Eddie, but as an institution——"

"I think marriage is a very good thing—for the unmarried, sir," came back Eddie respectfully.

"You'll get yours some day—they always do," declared Val, gazing at his man in indecision as to just how to receive his last remark. "I was just trying to tell you," Val went on, "about Miss Pomeroy and—er—I was just saying—I mean that I——"

"I congratulate you, sir," said Eddie, calmly. "I hope you and Miss Pomeroy will be happy." He dis-

missed the matter finally, as though it were of little consequence. "Your shaving water's ready, sir——"

"Go to the devil, you cold-blooded, hard-boiled egg!" Val flung at him in exasperation.

"Yes, sir," said Eddie. "Thank you, sir."

THE END

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